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THE MAGAZINE OF Fantasy & Science Fiction

JANUARY

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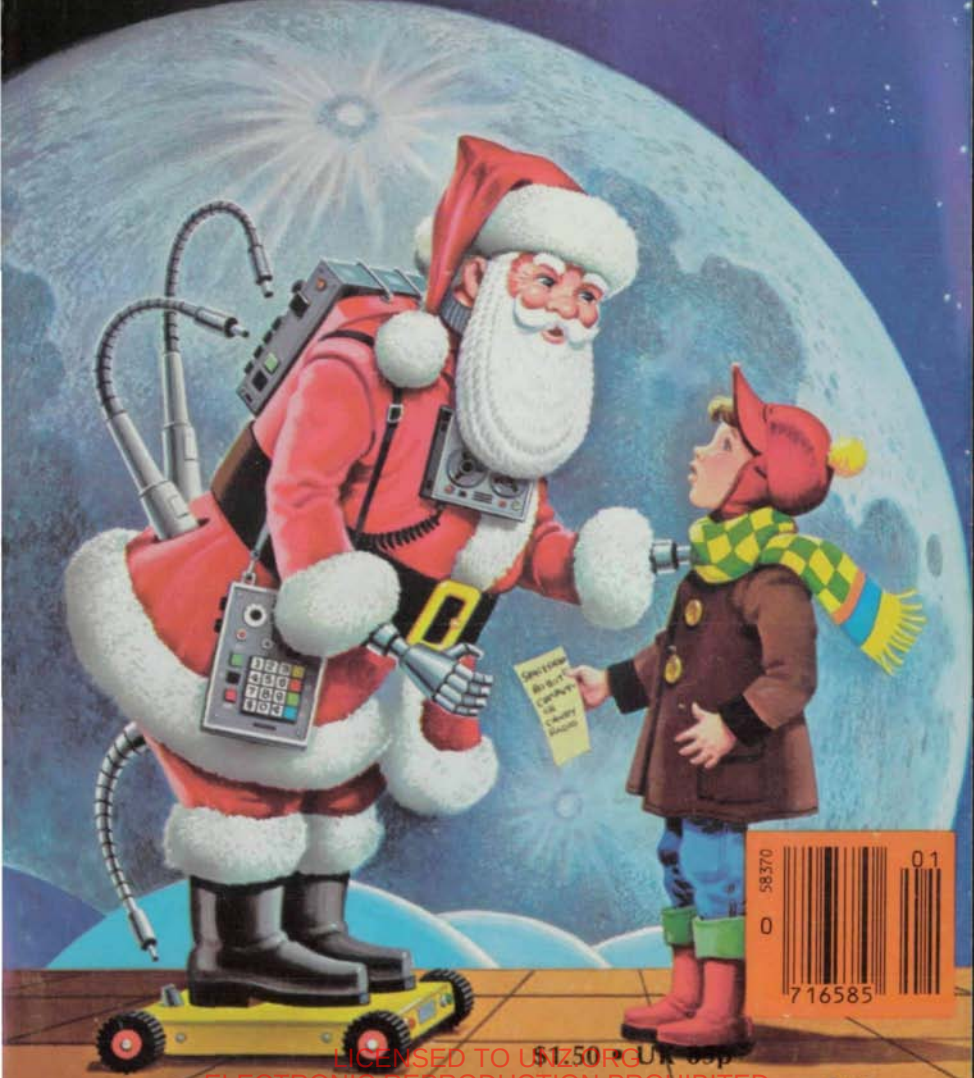

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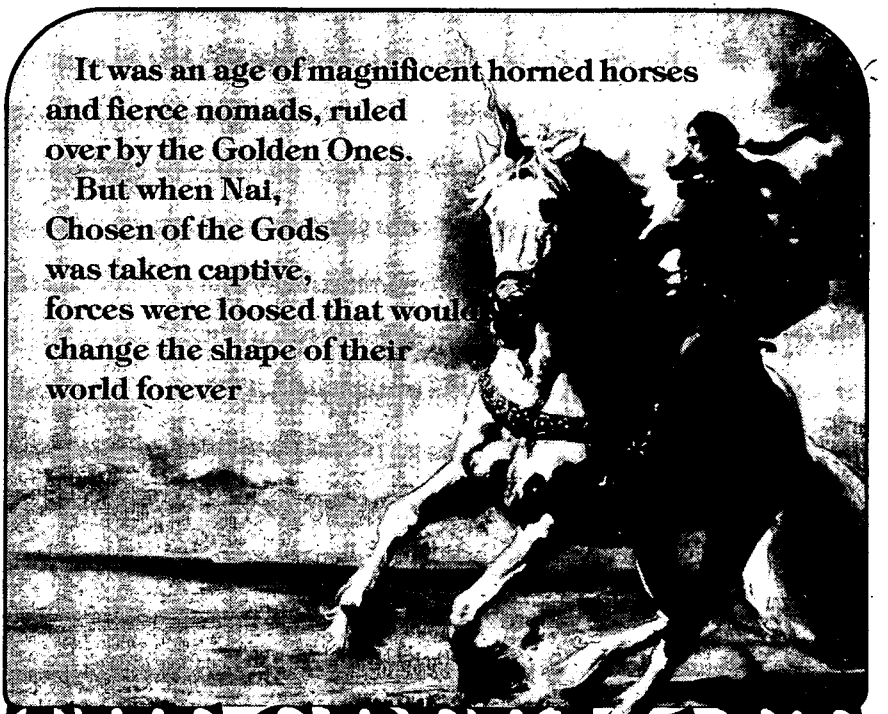
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George Alec Effinger likes to write science fiction stories about sports (e.g. "25 Crunch Split Right on Two," April 1975;" From Downtown at the Buzzer," November 1977), and he is very good at it. Witness this actionful and suspenseful story about a futuristic hockey game on a world full of deadly green ice.

Breakaway

BY

GEORGE ALEC EFFINGER

Old Number 12 stood by a port and looked down at the playing field. The port, for some reason, was shaped like the rounded rectangle of a CRT screen. It gave you the feeling that you were watching television, even while you stared out at real life. It had the effect of creating boredom and dissatisfaction, something the ship's designers never foresaw, because real life never moved so fast or so frantically as television. After thirty seconds at the port, you had a sneaking desire to change the channel. There was no way to do that, of course, and then you'd remember that you weren't watching television, that you were instead aboard an orbiting plastic and steel ball, and you were so far from home that sometimes your eyes stung with tears.

Václav Zajac, Number 12, turned away from the port. There really wasn't anything to see: a pale green-white world of ice turning in the dim light of a distant cold sun. He leaned against the bulkhead, feeling the machinery of the orbiting station thrumming in the wall at his back. He chewed his lip and stared at the deck without seeing anything in particular. He was avoiding the locker room, and he didn't want to take another glance through the port. There wasn't much else to do. That was one of the main troubles with the station: there was really nothing to do.

"Hey, Jackie," called another player. "You coming?"

"Sure," said Zajac. He didn't look up. The other man went into the locker room. Zajac studied the rippled sole of one shoe. Finally he took a long breath, exhaled slowly, and followed the other through the pastel green door.

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Only the lack of personal decoration set his locker area apart from any of the others. Some of the players had adorned theirs, added bits of individuality, audio dots and holoscenes that were intended to portray something about their owners' tastes. The fact that most of these scenes were the same—running to ghostly, beckoning women apparently afflicted with respiratory difficulties—didn't diminish their value. Zajac's locker space was bare except for his uniform suit and a few toilet and training articles on the shelf. He never felt the need to express himself by decorating his person or his belongings. He believed that his personality and his essential nature were well-enough defined downstairs, on the playing field. On the ice.

Václav Zajac was right about that. There wasn't another hockey player in the Havoc Force amateur league with his reputation and statistics. He didn't need tiger stripes on his faceplate to unnerve an opposing defenseman. That defenseman was already frightened of him, and had been since before the opening faceoff.

He sat on the bench in front of his locker and listened to the cheerful conversation of his teammates. They were excited and just a little artificially high-spirited. They were beginning to wind themselves tighter, to allow their controlled hysteria to get them to the competitive peak they would need to play the game down below. Zajac didn't participate in their jokes and shouts and laughter and curses. He waited quietly until he felt ready, and then he began to dress. He had always been sober, oddly silent and disturbingly distant, even as a young rookie many years before. He stood up and took a roll of broad tan adhesive bandage from the shelf. He began strapping his ankles. Around him in the locker room, soap and protective cups and wet towels flew through the air. If Zajac noticed, he showed no sign. The younger men respected him, but they played around him. Their missiles defied his air space, but no one ever presumed to include him in the locker room play.

The Condors were the station's entry in the Havoc Force Hockey Association, Second Quadrant champions for the last four seasons, league champions twice in that period. Zajac was a major reason for that success. His ice time was the only real life he knew. The endless days he spent monitoring the emptiness around the frozen rock of Niflhel seemed like punishment, with the occasional reward of liberty two hundred fifty miles below, on the nightmarish surface of the little world.

The game today was against the Rome IV Stingers, a weak team from the Third Quadrant. Rome IV was an outpost halfway across the spiral from Niflhel, and the two teams had never played each other before. Zajac, as he finished taping his ankles, wasn't even curious about them. He hadn't watch-

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ed any of the tapes of the Stingers' previous games. He hadn't even studied the defensemen he would be facing. It didn't make any difference who they were, he thought. When he got down there, on the familiar but deadly pale green ice, he would own the game. He would establish his dominance early, and he would skate and score at will. He told himself this over and over, in a kind of self-hypnotic way. It was as important to his readiness as his physical condition and equipment.

The ice hockey tournament had been invented by the psych maintenance division to deal with the peculiar claustrophobia that always threatened to turn into an epidemic at the isolated outposts. They couldn't prevent the panic that gripped people who felt themselves lost and permanently abandoned in space, but if the hostile environments and lonely scenes could be made more familiar, the experts said that maybe the screaming red horror would diminish and eventually all but disappear. It was a nice theory, and it even worked after a fashion. None of the hockey players, for instance, ever felt the choking terror growing in them while they glided over the ice fields of Niflhel. The game was great therapy. It was fun, there was an exciting and considerable welcome relief from the tedium of their passive military duties. Down on the ice, all was well. But in the shuttle ride back to the station....

The temperature on the surface of Niflhel was only a little pocket change of Kelvin, just enough to register on the meters, to differentiate the dusky world from the near-absolute of the surrounding interstellar medium. The place had once been a marvelous laboratory where gases that could be liquified under difficult circumstances on Earth were found in solid prairies of unusual ice, or pools of sluggish liquid with dreamlike properties. Niflhel would have been of immense interest to physicists and chemists except that since the expansion through the spiral, worlds of this kind had become so common they were no longer even named: silent, lifeless planets circling so far from their central sun that the star was just a glimmer of divorced energy in the daytime darkness of the sky.

Zajac put on a thin set of long underwear, made of cotton all the way from Earth. He chose only the best when it came to his equipment. He had tried synthetic fiber underwear as a rookie and it had almost cost him his life in a game on a forgotten and nameless world in the First Quadrant. His suit's climate sensors had failed briefly. The synthetic material didn't soak up his perspiration and tended to trap body heat. Zajac had almost stifled and dehydrated within the protective armor of his game uniform.

The suits were the most sophisticated pieces of equipment the technical teams could devise. They were lightweight, made of a dynaprene material that gave almost as much free-

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dom as everyday clothing, yet insulated and protected the wearer against the harshest environments in the spiral—or anyway against most of them. The dynaprene had a little trouble dealing with certain atmospheres of very high pressure and very low pH. But in the general realm of conditions, the suits were miracles of efficiency and comfort. Because of them, people inhabited places that were bluntly uninhabitable, a paradox the human beings resolved by ignoring it. The suits were specially modified for the athletes. They were a little larger, a little roomier, in order to fit in pads for shins, ankles, elbows, and shoulders. These fiber and foam pads were snug, comfortable, and didn't restrict movement in the least.

Clothed in the suit, Zajac sat on the bench and waited. His helmet, his gauntlets, and his skated boots still rested on the shelf. He was finished dressing and there was nothing more for him to do until it was time for the team to head for the shuttle. None of the others had even begun getting into his suit. Zajac closed his eyes and breathed slowly. He relaxed. He felt mildly happy, as though something marginally pleasant was just about to happen, like a healthy sneeze or a good yarn. He remained confident about his performance during the game, but he didn't think about it any longer.

"Jackie, the rest of you jokers, listen up." Zajac opened his eyes. The coach had come into the locker room. It must be almost time, thought Zajac. "These guys we're playing today are basically your everyday type of clowns," said the coach. "But that doesn't mean you don't have to pay attention to what you're doing down there. They're clowns and princesses, but they've scored a few goals, too. So watch yourselves. Check them hard a few times right in the beginning, and they'll probably skate clear of you the rest of the day. All right?" There was a murmur from the younger players. Zajac had heard all of this many times before. The coach gave the same speech before every game; every other team in the association seemed to be made up of clowns and princesses.

"Any change in their line-up?" asked Moro, the Condor goalie.

"No, so just go with the game plan. Keep the puck down at their end, don't pay any attention to their crazy defense. They do that a lot, I don't know why. Maybe they think it will confuse you. It's probably why they're always losers. Almost always. So just play your own game, control the puck, move it up and put it in. Get that first goal, and they'll have to play catch-up the rest of the day. You know that you can skate rings around them, they don't have anybody who can catch even Anangi, here." There was a sharp, quick laugh from the players, and Number 44, Bashake Anangi, spat angrily. He was a Condor defenseman not famed for his winged skates.

"Anything else?" asked the coach.

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He didn't look like what a coach ought to look like. He didn't have a big cigar or a Condor cap on his head. He wasn't wearing an old sweatshirt or a natty suit or ancient sneakers. He wore a white lab coat with an ID badge clipped to a lapel, and a headset and microphone over his thinning blond hair. He looked more like a communications technician, and when he wasn't coaching the hockey team, that's what he was.

There was a silence. The coach looked around the room, then clapped his hands. "So let's hit the ice," he said.

Zajac stood and stretched. The others hurried to complete their dressing. He took his gauntlets and boots and helmet and walked in his stocking-ed feet across the carpet of the locker room to the corridor leading to the shuttlecraft. Inside the shuttle he took his place on the long padded seat. He was all alone. There was a loud humming in the shuttle; it annoyed him and he tried to block it out. He busied himself. He went to the rack of hockey sticks against the aft bulkhead and found one of his. He used a low-lie Victoriaville, a number four. He carried it back to his seat and rubbed the blades of his skates against the stick, dulling them a little. You had to do this for every game; if the skates were too sharp, they tended to stick to the ice, rather than cutting and gliding. You'd have a restricted stride and a little trouble turning. On ice, on water ice back on Earth, this would be inconvenient and might cost a player and his team eventually in the final score. On Niflhel, where the ice was made of complex hydrocarbons frozen harder than steel by the fearful coldness of space, that kind of inconvenience could develop into a perilous situation. One of the secrets of the game—not much of a secret, really, because every player in the league understood it well enough—was that you had to keep moving. The weight of the person pressed the skates into the surface, the pressure melted a molecular layer of the hydrocarbon ice under the blade, just enough to allow the skate to slide along. If the skate stood there a millisecond too long, though, it froze in place and Niflhel had itself a brand new surface feature. The skates could be loosed from the boots, being held there by the same dileucithane tape that closed the uniform gauntlets and boots. But that meant the player, skateless, would have to run and slide over the ice, on the broad boot bottoms, and it was unlikely that anyone could travel that way more than three steps without falling. The layer of melted hydrocarbon ice under a human foot made virtually a frictionless surface. And a fall in that situation could prove fatal.

So the players kept moving. Even the goalies, who wouldn't see action nearby sometimes for the greater part of the game, skated back and forth, around and around their domains, rather than become brittle, frozen statues on the face of the green world.

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After a few minutes five other Condors filed into the shuttle. They took seats and waited. The coach didn't come with them; there wasn't a single thing he could do for the team down on the surface of Niflhel. From the station two hundred fifty miles above he could monitor the game and make decisions. The rest of the team, the substitutes, stayed behind with the coach, ready to be ferried down when they were needed. The starting six players looked at each other, just a little nervously. Zajac felt a little tension, a little tightening of his shoulders, a little tingling in his head and hands. It would have distressed a rookie, but it was vaguely pleasant to Zajac. He welcomed it. He had learned long ago to use every bit of his pregame agitation, to channel and focus it all.

"Well, Jackie, what do you think?" Zajac turned to face Gill, Number 16, the starting center. Zajac had no close friends, but he had played alongside Gill for more than five years and they had a kind of wordless communication on the ice, a coordinated effort that derived from intelligence and long experience. Conviviality counted for little on the glacial plain.

"No problem," said Zajac. His face was expressionless.

"Right," said Gill, "no problem." He seemed a little uncomfortable, as though, despite knowing Zajac's mood and manner, he wanted to make a deeper, more personal contact. "How do you feel?"

"Fine," said Zajac. "I feel good. You?"

Gill was quiet for a moment. He knew that he was being outmaneuvered. Whatever he said, Zajac would reply with just the right words to kill the conversation. Even when Zajac asked about Gill's condition, he did it in a way that demanded a meaningless answer. "Great," said Gill sadly, "really great. I got to tape." He busied himself taping his stick, winding the pearl-gray dileucithane tape around the flat part of the stick's blade, just where he would want to keep the puck as he moved it down the ice toward the Stingers' goal.

The trip down took almost thirty minutes. Zajac used the time to finish checking out his suit. He put on the boots and skates, tucking the ends of the suit's legs into the high tops of the boots, then winding gray tape tightly around the ankles of the boots. Dileucithane tape had the molecules of its sticky stuff polarized on one side. When the tape was stretched tight and wrapped over itself, no man alive was strong enough to pull it apart. A weak electric current, however, applied from within the suit, released the hold and the tape became just a dull-colored length of rough cloth. There was no way to pull the boots off without first removing the tape; Zajac's foot would pull off first.

Next he checked the neoprene laces of the boots and the tape that held the skates themselves tight. In the first year of the association, players used

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skates brought from Earth made for use under Earthlike conditions. The rawhide thongs held moisture, froze as solid as a rope of glass, and shattered under the first application of stress. Men suffered because of that small unforeseen aspect of the eternal winter. It didn't take long, though, to find replacement materials that wouldn't be affected by the temperatures near absolute zero. Dynaprene, neoprene, and dileucithane performed perfectly. Or, at least, well enough so that no one had perished on the pale ice fields since their introduction.

Zajac nested his helmet into the locking rings around the neck of his uniform suit. He heard the buzz and click of the helmet's circuits cutting in. He saw the projection of the playing field at the top of the faceplate, a rectangular map lying on its long side with two vertical slashes for the goals and a vertical stripe for the center line. The map represented the whole field of play, which was huge, immense compared to the hockey rinks on Earth. The rectangle marked out on the surface of Niflhel measured one mile by three.

Zajac touched on the receiver and switched from one channel to another. On the first channel he heard two of his teammates talking to each other, telling grotesque stories in two languages. On the second channel there was only static; later he would be able to hear the communications of the Stingers' players, scrambled so that none of the Condors could intercept their strategy. On the third channel there was gentle music, instrumental versions of show tunes from faraway stage successes and popular entertainers. During the game on the fourth channel he would be able to hear the coach's directions; now there was only the sound of slow, regular breathing, a kind of irritating whistling, and the coach's unconscious humming. Zajac switched to the fifth channel and listened to the internal communications of the orbiting station.

A red warning light flickered on his faceplate, indicating that his suit's integrity was breached. Of course that was true, since he hadn't put on his gauntlets and closed the sleeves of the uniform. He did that, winding the dileucithane tape around his forearms. He was now sealed into the suit, and he made a quick check of the life-support circuits. Every gauge showed green, healthy, fine, perfect, ready to go. Zajac clutched his stick and waited for landfall.

The shuttle set down in a great silent explosion of clouds of methane and formaldehyde liberated from the craggy face of Niflhel. The hydrocarbons sublimed instantly, invisibly, from ice to gas, leaving ringed depressions of melted frost which solidified immediately into pocked craters. Václav Zajac climbed out of the shuttle and skated away in long, lazy curves.

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The shuttle shook and flared and lifted back into the black sky, but he didn't watch it go. The men from the Niflhel station were delivered one by one to their starting positions on the ice. When they left the shuttle they skated around in circles, getting the feel of the hard ice again, enjoying the freedom and the peace, welcoming the change from their devastatingly dull jobs in orbit. They waited for arrival of the Rome IV Stingers. They didn't care how long that would take.

"Here they come," said a voice over Zajac's receiver. He looked up and saw another shuttle—or maybe the same one, he couldn't tell.

"Okay, boys, line up," said Gill, who was the team's captain. "Niflhel Station, this is Gill. Plug in the position markers, please."

"Right, Maxie," said a voice from the station. Zajac's faceplate lit up with seven colored dots, layed over the rectangular map of the playing field. Five of the dots were green, and represented the positions of Zajac's teammates. One dot was orange, resting on the center stripe, and marked the puck. One dot was fiery red, and showed Zajac's own relative position. When the Stingers hit the ice, they would show up as blue dots. The system was necessary because for extended stretches of play some of the players would be out of sight of each other.

Even with the suit lamps and the photo amplifiers in the helmets, the upper limit of visibility was slightly under twelve hours. The game lasted fourteen hours by the clock on the orbiting station. A skater's endurance was figured at about eight hours; after that his judgment and precision began to suffer, to deteriorate so rapidly that very shortly he had difficulty merely keeping himself upright. It was the coach's job to keep track of his players' condition by monitoring their vital signs and analyzing their performance during the game. Substitutions were made carefully, protecting the players and preventing the other team from seizing an advantage. The coach's role was vital. The game was more than a battle to wrestle a neoprene puck into the other team's cage; it was a deft balance of strength and conditioning, of skill and shrewd guesswork and decision.

Václav Zajac skated in the twilight at his wing position. He was stationed at a point one mile from his team's goal, where Moro patroled the six-foot-wide net, and a half mile from the center line. He was at one wing, a quarter mile from Gill at center, a half mile from Pete Soniat at the other wing. A half mile behind him were the two defensemen, Seidl and Brickman. He saw their green dots on his faceplate, wavering about as they skated around waiting for the game to begin. The orange puck still rested at center ice. There would be no faceoff as such; referees were of little value on a playing field of three square miles. They couldn't hope to follow all of the

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action and catch all of the penalties. The game would begin when a signal bell sounded in their helmets, triggered by an association observer and impartial umpire aboard the orbiting station. As for fouls—there weren't any. The play sometimes got a little testy and just a little physical, but real fights were infrequent because the suits were so well padded and insulated that a punch did little damage.

The bell rang. Gill shot off his mark toward the stationary puck. His opposite number on the Rome IV team raced toward him. Zajac and Soniat angled toward the center, skating easily. There was no chatter on the first channel; Zajac switched to channel four, to hear the coach. "All right, boys," said the coach, "let's go, let's go." The coach didn't have anything terribly cogent to suggest yet; it was all cheerleading until somebody got hold of the puck. That wouldn't be for a few minutes, because Gill had a half mile to skate before he could begin to locate it.

"They're fanning out, Jackie," said the coach. When he had something important to say, he could broadcast on both channels one and four.

"Right, I hear you, coach," said Zajac. He saw on his faceplate the rapid movement of the Stinger wings heading out from their starting position. They were going to flank the Condors' front line, gambling, banking that their center would come up with the puck and then they'd be past the Condors' first line of defense without a struggle. Of course, if Gill reached the puck first, the Stingers would be in bad shape. "Pete," called Zajac to his other wing, "what do you want to do?"

"What's it look like, Maxie?" asked Soniat.

"Too soon," said Gill, huffing a little as he sprinted toward the center line.

"Maxie has it," said the coach calmly. "The projection is that he'll reach the puck forty-four seconds before their boy."

"We'll be through them," said Soniat.

"Sixteen strong side," said the coach, calling the play.

"Okay," said Soniat.

"Right," said Gill.

"Did you hear that?" asked Zajac. The two defensemen behind him answered that they did.

"That's assuming Maxie doesn't fall on his face getting there," said Moro from his lonely goalie post.

"Uh," snorted Gill.

The two wingers, Zajac and Soniat, were converging on center ice. When the three Condor players got sufficiently close together, they would appear as one large blue blur on the faceplates of the Stingers. The puck would be a muted glow submerged beneath them. One of the Condors would carry the puck toward the Stinger goal and the others would swing away, but it would be a moment before the dots on the faceplate maps would separate enough for the Stingers' defensemen to know

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who had the puck and in what direction he was going. Those seconds would mean a considerable headstart. Under normal circumstances it would be almost impossible for the Stingers to chase down the puck carrier. Only superb play and a good deal of luck would save them. The Condors would converge again in the area of the goal, so the Stinger goalie would not have advance warning of where the puck was coming from. He would see three streaking Condor skaters, and have no notion which man would be the attacker. They would come at him from straight on and from oblique angles to the right and left, and he would be helpless until the final instant of the approach. Then everyone watching the game would learn what the poor man's reactions were like.

Soniat would take the puck off to the left, crossing the routes of Gill and Zajac. The three would weave their way down the ice, skating apart as far as an eighth of a mile and then returning, passing the puck to each other whenever one of the Stinger defensemen seemed to analyze the pattern too well.

The play was a good one. The trouble was that it just never got off the ground.

"Damn it to hell," muttered Gill in Zajac's ear.

"What's wrong?" asked the coach.

"The damn puck isn't here."

"Oh boy," murmured Seidl, "he missed it."

"I was off by less than a hundred yards," said Gill.

"Get moving, Maxie!"

"Too late, he's got it," said Gill. "Look out, here he comes."

"We see him," said Zajac. Because he and Soniat had been closing in, they weren't far from the Stinger center's path. Gill hooked around in vain pursuit, but Zajac closed in on an angle that would intercept the puck carrier before either of the Rome IV wingers could arrive to help out.

"Take it away, take it away," called Moro. Calling out encouragement was about all he had to do at this stage of the game.

"I'll get the son of a buck," said Gill. He was still trailing Zajac, who was shortening the distance between himself and the puck carrier. After a minute he announced that he had visual contact with the Stinger center.

"Crease the bastard!" cried the coach. The game transformed him from a pleasant, amiable technician into a half-crazy commander who lusted to get out on the ice himself.

"Exactly what I'm going to do," said Zajac. Some players would have skated alongside the opposing player, trying to fish the puck away with swipes of the stick. Zajac's technique was a little more direct and accounted for his intimidating reputation. The two men skated directly at each other; for a while it seemed that the Stinger center didn't know Zajac was coming. Then he must have been warned, be-

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cause he looked up and jerked as if startled. He began skating away from Zajac, but Zajac was faster. He closed the gap between them, coming in from the Stinger's side. He let himself glide past the man a few feet, planted one skate, and swung around. Zajac took off after the puck carrier and caught up to him in five or six powerful strides. They skated silently together, matched stroke for stroke. The Stinger protected the puck by changing his stick to his other hand, keeping the puck out of range of a slashing reach by Zajac, but that wasn't Zajac's plan. He, too, transferred his stick to his outside hand. He raised his left arm to shoulder height, then brought it down and back, catching the Stinger skater in the chest with his elbow. The man leaned backward, arms flailing, off balance. Zajac gave him a slight push, and the nameless man toppled over on the ice. Zajac slapped the puck away a few feet, skated after it, then changed direction and began cutting smoothly back toward Maxie Gill, the center line, and —one and a half miles beyond—the Stinger goal.

"You got it?" asked the coach.

"Sure," said Zajac, not even breathing hard, "no problem."

"No problem," said Gill.

"Way to go, Jackie," said Brickman.

"Sixteen strong side?" asked Soniat.

"As before," said the coach. "Nice playing, Jackie."

Zajac aimed for his rendezvous with Gill and Soniat.

The play developed exactly as it had so many times on the coach's animated board. Zajac brought the puck up, fed it to Gill. Zajac crossed over to the left wing, Gill continued up the middle, then passed the puck to Soniat. Soniat drove toward the goal, and Gill slipped into the right wing. Soniat crossed left, abandoned the puck to Zajac, and Zajac skated toward Gill. The puck leapt from blade to blade, and the puck carrier swooped and changed. The three men wove a braided pattern in the ancient chill of Niflhel. Soon the Stingers were faced with a problem. Only two defensemen, and then the goalie, stood between the three Condors and the first score of the game. The Stingers would have to make a choice, and a speculative one at that. It would be a poor decision for both defensemen to gang up on a single charging Condor lineman, and so each picked one of the three and intercepted. One of the Rome IV skaters went after Gill, and the other decided upon Soniat. At that precise moment, however, Zajac had the puck on the right wing, and undeterred he sped through the last of the Condor defense, unhindered now toward the goal.

"Nothing to it now, Jackie," said Gill, a little short of breath.

"Breakaway, breakaway!" chanted the coach. He had offered a minimum of thoughtful guidance, but so far this game hadn't needed any.

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"No one to stop you now, Jackie," said Soniat. "We checked these fools hard. You're in the clear."

Alone. All alone on the pale green ice, beneath the unwavering stars of a stranger world, Zajac skated, exhilarated, cheered and warmed by his own skill and luck and daring. A little over a mile to the goal, according to the rough estimate he could make from his faceplate map. Then would come the final dramatic thrill of deking the Stinger goalie out of position, the silent man-on-man confrontation and the slamming home of the puck, the flash of the neoprene stick and the clean flight of the puck into the corner of the net. He pictured the goalie lying sprawled vainly across the ice, and Zajac celebrating all alone, all alone until Gill and Soniat joined him for the cross-country journey back into position for the next faceoff....

All alone. It was the time of the game that Václav Zajac loved the best. He luxuriated in the feeling of solitude, of purposeful activity, of being the focus of energy in the dynamic effort. He leaned forward and skated with long, powerful strides. He looked around him to the close horizon: there was nothing to see, no other people, no physical features of dramatic interest. The photo maps in his helmet showed him just smooth glass underfoot and velvet sky above, the gliding orange puck and the diamond-chip stars. This was exaltation. Perhaps this had always been the utter joy of the sport, since the days when Indians skated on frozen lakes with the ribs of elks bound to their feet. When Zajac had been a small boy he had played shinny, battling a small rubber ball across the frozen river of his native Moravia. He had learned the game, learned the techniques, subjected himself to the necessary conditioning, accepted the demands and rewards, at an early age. Now, separated from those games by many years and uncountable miles, he was still getting the same intoxicating sensation as he ripped the puck away from the other team and set out alone toward the goal. He was inexorable. He was overpowering. He was alone.

He skated with his head up, his knees slightly bent. He kept the puck ahead of him, moving it forward with little taps, first to the left, then to the right. The feeling of pure speed was like a passionate embrace. He wanted it to go on and on, never to end, and it wouldn't end, not until he climaxed the overwhelming surge down the ice with the conquering drive into the goal. Even then the excitement would linger, fading a little of course, but the giddy arousal would remain, spoiled only by the arrival of his teammates and their chattering congratulations. That always ruined it a little for Zajac, but it never destroyed the experience completely. The race was always his, and he lived for it alone. Now, on the home ice of Niflhel, he exulted.

"Let's go!" said Brickman, who was

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miles behind, completely out of the action, who had nothing to do but skate about somewhat bored and watch Zajac's green dot streak toward the goal on his faceplate.

"Okay, Jackie, okay!" said the coach.

Zajac grimaced and changed the channel. He listened to the soft, lilting, excruciating music for a while.

He was thinking about the move he was going to use on the Stinger goalie. His mind wasn't on his skating, on the immediate condition of the playing field. He didn't see the frozen ripple, the small raised scar on the glacial floor. He didn't know it was there until his skate hit it with a numbing shock. There was a raw grinding feeling, and then Zajac was flying flat in space, falling. He landed heavily on his left side, his left arm pinned under him. There was a noiseless push of liberated gases; it was as jarring as a blow to the jaw in a beer-soaked brawl. Then everything was still. Everything was very quiet. Everything waited. Zajac was stunned and probably dying, but he didn't know it yet. He was caught in a billion-year-old trap, and he hadn't even heard it spring shut. He would have to learn the rules one by one, the hard way, and if he was going to survive he had no time to lose.

"Oh, hell," he said. He took a deep breath.

No one answered. No one wondered what had happened.

"I guess I'm all right," he said.

No one asked him what he meant.

"Coach?" he said.

The black coldness waited.

"I fell pretty hard out here but I'm okay. I can feel the puck. I'm lying right on top of it. Give me a minute to catch my breath." He felt warm. Actually, as he calmed down a little, he felt hot. His suit wasn't cooling him off enough. He wondered what was wrong. He tried to sit up, to take a quick inventory of his monitoring systems. He learned with an ice-cold shiver of fear that his helmet was frozen fast to the rock-solid ice. He nearly dislocated a shoulder trying to raise his head.

Zajac was afraid. He had never before felt this particular kind of fear, this awareness of the nearness of death. It was so close, the end of his life, that he could not see how he could avert it. He knew he couldn't deke death with a good feint in one direction, then go skating off free and clear in another. It would take more than that. He didn't know what it would take, and that thought terrified him. He needed help, and that thought mortified him. But his terror was greater.

"Coach?" he called. He waited in vain for a reply. He switched channels. "Maxie? Pete?" There wasn't even the sound of static. He went back and forth through the five channels: there were four channels of utter, terminal silence, but channel three was coming through clearly. The damned music,

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sweet strings and a binging triangle playing a sprightly march. It was a paralyzing insult added to his calamity.

"Hey, coach!" Zajac screamed. His voice sounded raw and harsh to himself, and the effect was ominous. He was in trouble, that was definite, but he was ashamed that he was losing control so quickly. He forced himself to calm down, to think. He carefully appraised his situation.

Evidently he wasn't receiving his teammates' communications. That didn't mean, though, that they weren't receiving his. "Coach, Maxie, Pete, if anybody can hear me, I had a tumble and I'm frozen onto the ground. My helmet and my shoulder. I landed on a couple of the trade-off buttons and they melted the ice, and then I got caught in it. I can't hear a thing. I can't hear you, and I can't see where you are. My faceplate map isn't functioning. I don't know what to do. You're going to have to come get me, because I can't move. I only have one arm free, and the trade-off buttons are going to be overworked, trying to compensate for the coldness of the ground. So hurry." He stopped talking. He felt a little foolish, not knowing if anyone could hear him.

What next? He didn't know. The climate control would be raising the temperature of his suit as the internal heat bled away. Eventually the heating unit would fail, and then it wouldn't be long before Zajac, suit and all, would be lifeless solid human ice. He didn't know how much longer the suit's unit could function.

As he waited, an unpleasant thought returned again and again: his only hope was that he'd be found and rescued in time. The prime concern, therefore, was that if the others weren't receiving his calls, and if neither his suit nor the puck were sending out signals, they would never stumble across him in time. And stumble across him is what they'd do—eventually. If they ever found him at all, they'd trip across his marble-stiff corpse in the dark.

There was no way of judging how quickly the time passed. The sun—the dim, distant star that barely held Niflhel in its weak grasp—cast no shadows on the enemy ice. Zajac couldn't see that sun from his sprawled position, so he wouldn't be able to observe it as it cut its way through the strange constellations. He doubted if he'd be alive long enough to notice much stellar movement in any case. There was nothing else within sight that could help him in any way. There was nothing else at all but ice, endless ice, murderous ice.

Zajac waited and studied himself closely for any sign of panic. The notion that at the end, as he began to feel

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the sting of death creeping along his rigid limbs, he might lose control of his mind was more repellent to him than the threat of death. He feared madness more. Though his suffering would be limited by the mercilessness of the environment, he swore that he would choose an immediate end by his own hand rather than descend muttering and weeping into insanity. It occurred to him that his promise was one he might not want to keep at that final instant, or even be able to remember.

There were many things to regret while he waited between life and death. He thought about his joyless childhood, about the unkindness he had often shown others, about the broken vows and broken dreams, about all the things of a lifetime that are without meaning and are given importance only by an ultimate realization that they can now never be corrected. Zajac felt contempt for his own remorse, because he knew how shallow it was. Even as the tears slipped from his eyes, he laughed skeptically. "You don't mean a word of it, Jackie," he whispered. "Try to die like a man." Whatever that meant....

This gelid vista would be the last thing he would see: a jagged horizon, low ridges of pallid green shining in his suit's lamplight, ice of a color he had seen sometimes in a young woman's eyes, a sky as black and empty and devoid of hope as Hell—and wasn't Hell described just like this? A lake of ice, rather than pits of flame? And Lucifer frozen in the middle of it, immobile and bitter? The comparison made Zajac laugh aloud, and it was not a healthy laughter, with just the faintest tinge of hysteria. It brought his wandering thought to a sudden focus. His experiment with fancy ended abruptly.

Was there anything that he could do to release the helmet from the tenacious ice? His hockey stick lay on the rough surface not far from his outstretched right hand, within reach. Zajac didn't believe he could use it to chip the helmet free; the neoprene was tough, but not as hard as the ice. Still, he reached out and grasped the end of the blade, then drew the stick near. He would never be able to use it to pry the helmet loose, either. The stick would snap like a dry bone.

If he were to live, to free himself from the frozen tomb, he needed an audacious idea. In order to find the key, he needed all the coolness of thought on which he prided himself. And, he admitted, he might need all the crazy reasoning of desperation, as well. In the same way that he might have proceeded to fix a leaking faucet at home, he took it by the numbers.

How could he get free? By removing himself from the ice, of course. How could that be done? By getting rid of the ice, by breaking it or melting it. Could he break it? He had already decided the answer to that was no.

That left melting.

What could melt the ice? Under

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these circumstances, only the heat inside his suit. The warmth from the trade-off buttons was melting the ice in that immediate area, leaving a bowl-like depression under his left side, but his helmet was too far away, and there was no way of delivering the heat from between his shoulders to the necessary point.

Was there another way of transferring heat from inside his suit to the place where the helmet was welded to the ground?

Zajac didn't have an immediate answer. More accurately, at first he didn't want to examine the only solution that did present itself.

"Well," he murmured after a moment, "there is a way." He had a flickering, half-formed notion.

It was unpleasant. It was very unpleasant.

The idea grew, and Zajac realized that there was every reason to believe it would work. But the more clearly he understood what had to be done, the more grotesque and awful it seemed. Yet it was a choice between sacrifice and certain death. Rational thought demanded—

Zajac pressed the button in the handle of his hockey stick. The dileucithane tape wound around the blade immediately lost its adhesiveness. With his free hand he removed the relaxed tape from the stick. Now it was ready to be used again, and he was careful not to foul it in tangles because he would never be able to untwist it, and that would be the end of him. He transferred an end of the tape to his left hand and clumsily wrapped the length of it around and around his right arm, just above the tape that sealed his right gauntlet to his sleeve. He pulled the tape as tight as he could, so tight that he knew he was shutting off the circulation in his arm.

It occurred to Zajac that if he managed to save himself and then stay alive until he could be rescued, he might look back on this nightmare and realize that there had always been a simple and easy way to solve the crisis. If there were he couldn't see it now, and as he became more frantic he cared less about what he would think in the future. The terrible present overshadowed all that. Maybe he would curse himself for a fool. Maybe his teammates would be shocked by the means he had selected to save himself, when there was some other obvious method he had overlooked. Zajac's mouth was very dry, and there was a loud buzzing in his head that distracted his attention. He was near emotional collapse, and he put the thought of hypothetical painless answers in the back of his mind. He had not been able to find one, and so he was compelled to follow the path he had chosen.

His right hand tingled with a myriad sharp pinpricks. He closed his eyes tight and tried to calm his agonized thoughts. The pain in his hand became a throbbing that he couldn't ignore. Needles of pain stabbed up his

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arm from his fingertips to his shoulder. It was time to act, but the process of summoning courage and strength was more difficult than he had imagined. "Come on, Jackie," he whispered, "just do it. Do it or you'll die right here."

His left thumb found the button on his right gauntlet. He pressed it, giving as he did an odd, high-pitched cry. The tape on the gauntlet went dead. He unwrapped it quickly and flung it away. He ripped the gauntlet off with his left hand and shrieked as the unbearable cold attacked his exposed hand. He grabbed at the back of his helmet, twisting as much as he could so that he could reach the frozen bond. The remaining warmth in his freezing hand turned the ice to thin and poison gas. He rolled over, and his helmet was free. He sobbed loudly and rose to his knees. His right hand remained on the ice where he had rested.

Zajac got to his feet, staggered, stumbled, fell again to his knees. He felt dreamlike, a little dazed. He felt no pain; that meant that he was in shock. He was alive, but he didn't know for how long. The ragged end of his forearm was exposed beyond the tourniquet of tape, and the killing cold would soon crawl through his veins like serpent's venom. He was very cold. He looked back to where he had lain prisoner. His right hand, his strong hand, was blanched white as new snow in the glare of his lamp. The thumb had snapped off. The light flashed from a gold ring on the fourth finger.

Zajac's eyes opened wide and he stared, sickened. He clutched his ruined arm to his chest. Suddenly, like a vast and overpowering expulsion of evil, he vomited inside his helmet.

With an effort he got to his feet again, a bit unsteady on his skates. Freeing the helmet had been only part of the problem, although he hadn't wanted to think about the rest until now. He was faced with the difficulty of staying alive until he could find the other players. Evidently they couldn't find him, or they would already have come to his aid. His uniform suit wasn't transmitting its signal. The puck, though, ought not to have been affected. He remembered, however, that he had been on top of it the entire time. It was likely that its position had just reappeared on the faceplate maps of both the Condors and the Stingers. If Zajac were lucky, they'd all be sprinting toward him that very instant, and they'd be there to call for help in a few minutes.

If he weren't lucky, of course, the puck was as lost as he, and therefore he'd have to find his own salvation. He grimaced. That was the way it had always been, the way he had always preferred. He was too light-headed from shock and loss of blood to recall how only a short time before he had rejected that delusion.

In the single-mindedness of his condition, Zajac decided to head for the Stinger goal, the nearest place where he could be certain of finding another

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person. He tried to find traces of his passage across the ice before his accident, to get an idea of the direction of the goal. The ice was so hard that his tracks were almost invisible, but he caught them in the oblique beam of his lamp. He saw the small wrinkle of ice that had caused his fall, and he mouthed a vicious Slovak curse. He picked a place on the horizon, a tiny landmark of three sharp spires of ice, and skated weakly toward it. He estimated that the goal should be only a bit more than a half mile beyond it.

His right arm, from the shoulder to the torn end, felt paradoxically warm. The rest of his body was colder than before, and he shook with chills. He tried not to think about the loss of his hand, but the image of it lying abandoned on the ice kept occurring to him, and he had to fight down new sickness again and again.

After fifty yards he realized that he was carrying his hockey stick. "Stupid," he said to himself. He dropped it to the ground and then came to a halt. "What I ought to have is the damn puck." The puck may or may not have been transmitting. If it were, it would give the others his position. It was worth taking along. He bent down and picked up his stick, then turned and went back for the puck. It took him several minutes to find it; he spent the whole time muttering angrily. When he located the puck he started off again toward the Stinger goal, holding his stick left-handed, stick-handling the puck across the ice. He was too confused to realize that he could simply have carried the puck in his left hand, that he didn't need to obey the rules of hockey: for Václav Zajac, that game ought to have been over. But his thoughts were sluggish and wrapped in a kind of muffling peace. At intervals a great, sharp, piercing pain broke through the fog, the first tentative bites of the massive anguish to come. Clumsily, holding the hockey stick in the crook of his right elbow and guiding it with his left hand, Zajac maneuvered the puck toward the indifferent horizon.

Zajac wandered in the dream delirium that accompanies serious bodily trauma. He patted the puck along, directing all of his attention to that small chore, forgetting for the moment what had happened to him and where he was going. The only thing that seemed to matter was nudging that neoprene puck forward in a straight line. At one point he assembled his senses enough to ask himself why this task was so vital. He had no ready response. It had something to do with the game. He recalled the game well enough, and the team and the station. He tried to imagine what everyone was doing back aboard the station. He wondered if they were following his progress, if they were excited or concerned or completely bored. The game must mean very little to the others aboard the station, he realized. To them it was only a pattern of glowing

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points of color on a two-dimensional map. How involved could they be with that? The action was rapid, as the orange dot sped toward one end of the rectangle or the other. But there was no indication that the points of light even represented living players. As far as the people on the station knew, the hockey team may never actually have been delivered to the surface of Niflhel. The games might really be played at a keyboard console in another room.

If that were true, though, Zajac mused, why did he hurt so terribly? And what the hell was he doing?

The numbing clouds in his mind dispersed to several bright, clean brass notes. It was the music again on channel three. This time, however, Zajac welcomed it; it was reassurance that he wasn't alone in the world. He had begun to feel like the last survivor of his race, or like a solitary spirit of the cosmos awaiting physical reality. He listened to an appalling trumpet improvisation based on the Horn Call from *Siegfried*. In addition to the trumpet there was a piano, a snare drum, a string bass, a vibraharp played with a heavy hand, and a guitar. The music pulled Zajac along, and he was grateful for it. Utter silence would have killed him, would have persuaded him that he was tired, that he shouldn't bother to go on, that an attempt to prolong his life was an affront to the entire entropic basis of the universe. But human beings had shouldered aside that silence and filled the space with sappy music, and that accomplishment heartened Zajac. He would not surrender until he, too, had made a mark equal to that trumpet solo.

Less than a quarter mile from his goal the agony dispelled all the soft sleepy thoughts. He saw and felt with a clarity that unnerved him. He was isolated as few people ever had been. He had been singled out, he was marked, and he had been made ready for death. His futile struggles were worse than useless—they were humiliating. How could Václav Zajac believe that he had the resources to repel all that a hostile world chose to throw at him? It was arrogance of the sort that hastened death.

Movement caught his eye. He looked up from the ice and saw a man in the green and white uniform suit of the Rome IV Stingers about a hundred yards away. It was their goalie. The man waved at him. Whether the goalie was signaling concern or boastful challenge Zajac couldn't tell. Even if the receiver in his helmet were functioning, the two men wouldn't have been able to communicate. Zajac took a better grip on his hockey stick and skated for the net. He was so dazed that his highest priority was scoring the goal. He forgot his own terrible condition. He slanted over on a path that would take him past the goal net at about a forty-five degree angle. He didn't worry about rocketing the puck past the goalie on the first pass; he

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wanted to get a look at the man's moves, his defensive tendencies.

Zajac's eyes tried to peer through a red haze that exploded into golden points of light. He heard his own heartbeat and the roaring of his blood, and the noise bore the hallow echoes heard usually only in dreams and drunkenness. The world seemed to pulse around him, to grow larger and then shrink so there was barely room for Zajac to breathe. In all the universe there was only Zajac's troubled brain, his bewildered senses, and the unwanted freight of ghastly pain. His terror had dissipated, replaced first by fatigue, then by mindlessness, finally by a growing resentment. His anger was directed entirely toward the Stinger goalie, whose duty it was to thwart him. Zajac desperately needed to slam the puck home, but now he doubted if he was strong enough to accomplish it.

Two familiar skaters in Condor uniforms approached him from the left wing. "Maxie, Pete," he said, sighing. He left the puck on the ice: he didn't need it any longer. They had found him.

Zajac skated in a wide loop toward the goal, then toppled forward. He sank to his knees, blinded by the throbbing pain. It was now a rhythmic beating that filled his entire consciousness. He stood again, unaware that he did, and he moved blindly over the ice. He cried softly to himself, and in a short while the pain subsided. It didn't vanish completely, but the hammering was pushed down to a manageable level, and allowed Zajac to clear his head.

He looked around and saw the goalie, who seemed unusually intent on Zajac. It had been compassion, then, that the man had been expressing. That made Zajac feel good. He expected to see the Stinger player crouched, wound tight, motionless as a stalking cat waiting for the first glimpse of the puck. Instead he was moving slowly over the ice, toward Zajac. Zajac waved his left arm wildly, ignoring the increase in pain, trying to tell the foolish goalie that everything was all right, that the worst had happened and Zajac was no longer worried, that the goalie had better tend to his own troubles because Gill and Soniat were speeding toward the open net, passing the puck between them. Zajac, not thinking clearly, tried to shout, "Get back to the net, you damn idiot!" The effort cost him, and he was struck down by an angry slash of pain. He lay still for a moment, an indefinite length of time. When his awareness returned, the goalie was only fifteen feet from him. Soniat had one arm in the air, Gill had the puck on his stick, in front of the goal. He did not take the shot. He swooped by and swung around, toward Zajac.

Zajac smiled placidly to himself. He rose to his knees, and he knew then that he was exhausted, used up. He might never skate away from that

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spot. He leaned on his stick and watched. He tried to see the face of the Stinger goalie through the man's faceplate, but it was obscured. Zajac listened to the music; it was partially drowned out by the drumming in his head. Gill skated close by, and Zajac wanted to wave but he couldn't. Gill dropped the puck by Zajac's side. It skidded a few inches and came to a stop against his knee. The goalie was bending forward, reaching out a hand, helpless, perhaps frightened. Gill was gesturing to Soniat, evidently suddenly aware of Zajac's desperate state. Soniat skated toward them. Gill pointed first to Zajac, then into the black sky. Zajac nodded; yes, yes, he understood, they were coming for him.

Zajac was fading. He wondered idly, as if he had no personal stake in the answer, if the shuttle would arrive in time. He looked up at the stars, then at Gill, then at the puck beside him. He pushed the puck with his stick, more than slapped it, awkwardly, from his kneeling position. An angry noise began to burr in his ears and a white flare burst in his head. Gill was waving an arm wildly but Zajac never took his gaze from the puck. It slid straight and true for the far side of the empty cage, and it seemed to take forever to cross the distance. It skimmed over the victorious ice, and as Zajac struggled to clear his vision, the puck came to rest at last, home in the corner of the goal.

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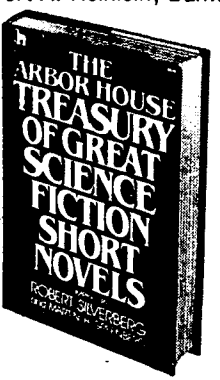

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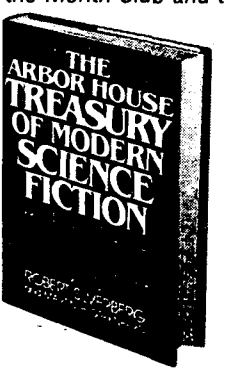

TENTH ANNIVERSARY

ARBOR HOUSE

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Our holiday season story is from Maureen Exter, who contributed a couple of stories to F&SF in the early 70's and writes: "I'm 34 now, happily settled in Powell River, B.C. The view here is grand with the ocean a block away and Vancouver Island beyond that. We're centered about a pulp and paper mill, and sometimes, on a clear day, you can smell forever. I'm a part time library clerk, my husband is an elementary school principal, and we've four children ages 1 through 11."

Santa Claws

BY
MAUREEN EXTER

It was just an ordinary inventory robot. Anyone could see that—except Willoughby. Willoughby was my boss' wife's nephew and heir-apparent to Leeds Department Store, so he didn't have to be overly bright. If Willoughby wanted to drape a Santa Claus suit on an eight-armed robot, then it was not for us ordinary employees to reason why. All we had to do was keep a straight face as the robot rolled around chanting "ho, ho, ho"...and that was hard enough.

That's what I was saying to Irene that first day until a sharp look came my way. And then a nasal "What did you say, Leo?"

"Nothing, Mr. Willoughby. I was just remarking to...Miss Norton how nice the Sporting Goods Department looks."

"And I was saying," Irene added quickly, "that the nativity scene with the three wise men bringing repeater rifles to the baby Jesus was all your idea, Mr. Willoughby."

"A nice touch, that," Willoughby said, beaming at her, "if I do say so myself."

"Personally," I said thoughtfully, "I like the angels with the scuba gear." And then there were the elves playing squash and the head of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer mounted on the wall near the telescopic gunsights.

Suddenly Willoughby whirled, sucking in his breath. "You missed that one!" he hissed. I turned in time to see the elevator door close. "That little twerp—in the blue sweater—he had a baseball glove! And you were standing here jawing!" He glared at me. "Well, you're supposed to be the store tec. Do something!"

One of the house phones was near the elevator. I pressed a button, and

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Sam's fatherly face appeared on the screen. "What's up, Leo?"

"Look for a boy in a blue sweater coming off the elevator with a baseball glove," I told him. "It may be ours."

"Gotcha." He clicked off. A few moments later he was back on, the protesting boy next to him. "Leo, maybe there's been a mistake." He held up the glove. "This isn't new, and it has his name on it."

I sighed. "Apologize for the store and give him a complimentary baseball. Sorry about that, Sam."

When I turned back, Willoughby was still hanging over Irene, a toothy grin on his face. Irene's cheeks were flushed, and she looked so gorgeous even in that dumb red elf suit all the saleswomen wore, that I felt like putting Willoughby's head up next to Rudolph's.

My mind filled with thoughts about what could be done with a gaff by a really creative person, I didn't notice the inventory robot roll up next to me. "What do you want for Christmas, little boy?" the metallic voice rasped. "Have you been good?"

I glanced down at it. Its recording device was partially hidden by a white beard, and six of its eight arms were folded inside the red jacket to make a paunch. Its lower shelf—usually used as a dolly—was extended as a lap. "I've been good," I muttered. "Too damned good."

"Do you have your Christmas list? I am Santa's helper. We are all Santa's helpers at Leeds. Give me your list, and I can help Santa fill it for you at Leeds."

I nodded towards Irene, still deep in conversation with Willoughby. "I want her." The robot clicked a few times, and I swiveled it about until it focused on Irene. "Her. The red model."

"You want...her...in your Christmas stocking." The robot wheeled up to them for a moment and then returned to me. "Where are your parents, little boy?"

"I am my parents," I answered, thinking of mom and dad back at the farm and wondering why the hell I'd ever left Idaho. "I say that I am allowed to have that red model in my Christmas stocking." The robot clicked a few times, and suddenly I became weary. I moved on towards the golf bags, the robot still following past the toy section. "Look," I said, "it's a joke, okay? Forget it."

"Joke," the robot said. "Delete...joke." I pointed him towards the elevator as it opened again, disgorging another lot of shoppers. He rolled towards them. "Joke...do not process...joke...red model."

It was early December, and shopping was beginning to hot up. All the new models of everything were coming in and going out faster than we could keep track of them. Despite all of our security measures, the store lost thousands of dollars worth of merchandise every day. A lot of it was big

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stuff, too—appliances, furniture, furs. If I didn't find where it was going and how it was getting out of the store, I might find myself back in Idaho sooner than I expected.

Willoughby had looked pleased as he left Irene, and it wasn't until several hours later that I was able to have more than a few words with her. The inventory robot clicked around, talked to the children, cleared their orders with their parents, and then processed the gifts for delivery.

Was I jealous of Willoughby? Jealous of someone who would tie a beard on a robot so that spoiled kids would run up big tabs? Willoughby had reasoned that robots still weren't seen much by the general public and that the kids would flock to Leeds to sit on this special Santa's lap. So, okay, he was right. The kids fought each other for positions in line, came again and again with their embarrassed parents, and their grandparents, and their aunts and uncles and cousins by the dozens. Toy sales were booming. Willoughby triumphant.

Finally it was closing time, and the last weary shopper had schlepped off into the elevator. Irene sat down heavily on the high stool behind the Sporting Goods counter and laid her head against the cash register. "I hate Christmas," she said wearily. "HATE."

I was helping straighten up—the avid shoppers mauled completely through the displays every couple of hours. "Right—bah, humbug. Scrooge was right. It's just a big commercial thing."

"There's nothing to it any more," she said, stretching. "Just hypocrisy and meanness and greed and a lot of horrid children wanting horrid things."

"Demanding customers."

"Junk merchandise."

"Reindeer-burgers."

"Frosty the snowcone."

"Turkey," I said loudly. "Roast potatoes and little carrots and stuffing and pecan pie frosted with sugar...."

Her head lifted a bit from the cash register. "Trees that smell like trees, with lights that twinkle...."

"A roaring fire to burn the backs of your calves when you stand too near." We stopped. "Idaho," I uttered.

She nodded soberly. "Montana."

We stared at each other for a moment. "Look, Irene," I said awkwardly, "I was going to do my laundry tonight, but maybe you'd like to go to a movie or something...."

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, Leo, but I'm going out with Mr. Willoughby to La Tour Rouge. I mean...he asked me and I said yes, But I'd love to another time. Really. Okay?"

"Okay."

But there didn't seem to be a next time. Willoughby always got to her first. There were two occasions that she and I had plans to go out, but Willoughby managed to find a couple of "emergencies" at work that needed Irene's particular attention. And Irene

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needed all the overtime she could get. She had a widowed mother and a couple of kid brothers back home, and I gathered things were pretty tight.

Willoughby did miss one time, though. I had gone over to Irene's apartment to pick her up — we were going to supper and a play — and found her totally immobilized with a bad cold. She'd called me at the store, but somehow the message hadn't gotten through. (I had my suspicions as to what happened to it.) Anyway, if you can picture a long-legged brunette in a scruffy sweatshirt and jeans, with her feet in blue mules, and her beet-red nose and watery eyes buried in a mountain of Kleenex, and if you still feel damned happy to be with her so that you can pour lemon tea down her throat...well, you'll know why I felt grateful to old dumb Willoughby that night.

But after she was well, she began ignoring me. It wasn't until three days before Christmas that I figured out why. I was standing next to the hockey equipment fingering the shin guards and trying to look like a shopper, when Willoughby suddenly appeared behind me.

"Leo!" I jumped. "Leo, you're daydreaming too much."

"Sorry, Mr. Willoughby." *Sorry jobs are so scarce, Mr. Willoughby. Sorry murder is illegal, Mr. Willoughby.*

"I don't want to take the matter up with my uncle, do I? He's already very concerned about the amount of merchandise that's gone missing."

"It's not going through these elevators," I protested. "Sam's watching the main floor, there are cameras on all the employee and fire exits, we...."

He grinned wolfishly. "Maybe Santa's reindeer are flying it away." Then he sighed, looking towards the heavens. "Better clean up your act, Leo." He started towards the elevator, where Irene was waiting, for once dressed in ordinary clothes instead of in her red elf suit. She seemed to be looking everywhere in the store except in my direction. Willoughby stopped. "Oh, Leo...."

"Yes, sir?"

"The Santa Claus robot is acting a bit peculiar —it hasn't been asking parents to confirm its orders every time. Tell Ezra to take a look at it."

I glanced at the robot. There was a black youngster, about seven years old, on its lap, and a couple more kids were waiting. "Okay."

He took Irene's arm. She looked briefly towards me but didn't meet my eyes. "And, Leo, tell Arnie to cover Sporting Goods if Miss Norton is late getting back from lunch. We're seeing some travel agents — to plan our honeymoon. Last night Miss Norton consented to become Mrs. Willoughby."

Her cheeks glowing, Irene followed Willoughby onto the elevator, and the doors closed.

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Of course! That was why she'd been ignoring me! Irene needed money—her brother was starting college next year. And there was old Willoughby, guaranteed to be worth plenty. And there I was, a crummy store tec with no future. If you've got it, sell it. Irene had it.

Miserable, I waited for the robot to finish with the kids. The seven-year-old had a long shopping list, mostly the usual, like trucks and toy tanks. "And," he finished up, "a baby brother."

"Have you been a good boy?" the robot asked.

"Yes, Santa," the boy answered eagerly. "I brush my teeth and make my bed, and I feed my guppies and help with the dishes...."

"You have been a good boy," the robot intoned, gently dumping him on the cushions that surrounded his dais. "Next, please."

I observed the happy boy starting to leave with his mother. The robot hadn't spoken with her. Since this meant that his entire function—taking orders and processing them—would be lost, I quickly told him to catch up with her at the elevator. He rolled over and spoke quietly with her. She smiled and whispered into his recorder.

"But I want a baby brother, too!" the boy was protesting as they entered the elevator.

The robot returned and functioned smoothly until the last two patrons left. Idly I wondered how many orders had been lost because the robot hadn't carried through. Hopefully, a lot of them. Big ones.

It was on that day that everything started hitting the fan. The Director of St. Michael's parish called to thank Mr. Leeds (that's *the* Leeds of Leeds Department Store) for his donation of sports equipment and asked his permission to nominate him for best corporate citizen of the year. A bewildered Mr. Leeds accepted the honor...and then found that it had cost him nearly $30,000.

Several employees found themselves issued checks far in excess of usual pay — in a few cases, millions of dollars in excess. These checks were worthless because they were machine-signed and the store's real biggies have to go through human hands. These were all rounded up and no harm was done, but Mr. Leeds ended up paying again because it was felt that a larger-than-usual Christmas bonus was required to restore employee morale.

The mystery of the inflated paychecks didn't last long.

We soon found that everyone had spoken to the inventory robot, who was still tooling around the fifth floor, speaking to children and grown-ups, and clicking in his mysterious way... and doing the inventory after dark.

Sam asked me to observe the robot after closing time to see how it was behaving during its normal operations. I gave it some usual orders, played

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back taped segments from its recording device, and watched it as it shifted stock for hours on end. Except for the peculiar clicking, it behaved in a boringly typical manner, endlessly performing small duties, extending its prehensile arms to link onto the metal rings in the ceiling and then drawing itself up until it arrived at the various tracks which lined the walls. Then around and around until it had completed its tasks and down again. Over and over. "Seems okay," I finally reported.

It wasn't sure if the robot had done the malfunctioning all by itself (although that was strongly assumed because of its forgetfulness) or whether one of the computers it fed into was the source of the problem. However, the robot was immediately removed from Santa Claus duty and deprogrammed; it would keep its red cap for the remainder of the Christmas rush, but its "ho-ho-ho" was gone forever.

And that seemed to be that. Except that on Christmas Eve it delivered a baby to the black youngster who had requested a baby brother.

The baby was a girl, blonde and blue-eyed. We pieced together the story later from her hysterical parents, Bill and Gloria Jennings. They were in their late teens and not long married. There hadn't been money for much of a Christmas, and they'd taken the baby in her secondhand buggy downtown just to walk the streets and look into the windows of the closed shops at all the things they couldn't afford. The young father had suggested irritably that it might be better for all of them if his wife took the baby and went back to her folks, and she'd been tearfully agreeing. And then, suddenly, the baby was gone! Their little girl, who had caused their marriage and all of their problems, was gone...and they desperately wanted her back!

The robot, still wearing its red-tassled cap, had carried the sleeping infant a few blocks away to the building where a baby had been requested. There were no stairs in front, and so it was able to roll directly into the lobby and take the elevator up to the proper floor. Then it rolled down the hallway and leaned on the buzzer. When the boy's astonished mother opened the door, it held out the baby. "For Johnny," it intoned. "He has been a very good boy."

Johnny's mother took the baby gingerly in her arms as the robot rolled swiftly away. The baby, awakened by the sudden lack of movement, began to cry, and Johnny and his father came out of their kitchen to stare.

"The...robot brought it," Johnny's mother managed to stammer.

"Oh, man!" Johnny yelled. "And you told me babies were brought by the stork!"

And then they'd called the police.

As store tec most involved in the

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problem, I was called into the head office about nine o'clock, along with Sam. We'd closed up for the Christmas holidays hours before, and the building was dark except for the usual night lighting. Except on the top floor. There it was high noon.

Willoughby was already up there, tie loosened, chewing his fingernails. Mr. Leeds' face was bright red. "Lawsuits!" he was bellowing as we walked in. "Kidnapping babies off the street, stealing...."

"It did nice things, too," Willoughby put in timidly.

"Nice things?!" Mr. Leeds exploded. "Like taking $30,000 worth of merchandise? That kind of nice things?"

"Uncle...I asked, and the tax people will love it. And you could be good citizen of the year."

"I could be in the poor house!" Mr. Leeds was looking wildly around. His eyes settled on Sam. "Sam, you've been with the store for fifteen years. Whose cockeyed idea was it to interfere with the inventory robot?"

Sam nodded towards Willoughby. "Mr Willoughby's, sir."

"But, sir, our sales went up...I can prove it...the graphs...."

"THE ROBOT KIDNAPPED A BABY!!!!"

"The baby *is* all right," I interjected. "She's back with her parents now."

Mr. Leeds sighed heavily. "They'll sue. I'll be ruined."

"They're not planning to sue, Mr. Leeds," I said. "I've spoken with them, and...they're grateful in a way."

Mr. Leeds looked up at me distrustfully. "Grateful?"

"They hadn't realized how much the baby meant to them until they lost her. They've been down on their luck, and they're happy just getting the baby back safe and sound. And they're particularly grateful for the job you offered the baby's father...."

"I offered...."

"In Repairs, sir," I said. "Mr. Jennings is very good with his hands, but jobs are hard to find nowadays."

"So I offered him a job?"

I nodded. Willoughby sprang in, "Leo, you're presumptuous! To offer a man a job at Leeds, without Mr. Leeds' permission or mine, *well...!*"

"Be sure the newspapers hear about it," Mr. Leeds said thoughtfully.

"I've already called a friend of mine on the *Trib*," I said.

Mr. Leeds nodded. "What about the boy who requested the baby?"

I grinned. "When he heard the amount of squalling that a baby could do, he decided he didn't want a baby brother after all." I paused. "Now he wants a horse."

Mr. Leeds stood up. "Okay," he said, "but there's just one thing we have to know: where is the robot now?"

It was a good question, and I was quietly sweating the problem of other requests that might have been made to

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the robot. Of course, all of our robots had been fed with the laws of robotics at the factory, but...what if this one had malfunctioned to the extent that it damaged people? What if some kid, recently spanked, had said that what he wanted for Christmas was for his father to be taken for a short walk off a high pier? What if we got some junior hit man out looking for submachine guns? What if someone had asked for cash or jewels or The Bomb? What if.... We *had* to find the robot!

Police leaves were canceled, which was not a nice thing to happen on Christmas Eve, and orders were issued that if the robot refused to respond to verbal commands, the police were to shoot—and to watch for possible ricochets. Reports began to come in. A bearded vacuum cleaner was seen rolling about the streets, peering into windows, stopping traffic. Some poor dopey tried to mug the robot in an alley and got deposited in a trash bin for his trouble. When fished out by the beat cop, he maintained that Santa Clause had told him that he hadn't been a good boy. "But I will be after this!" he sputtered, wild-eyed. "Honest —I'm going straight—I don't ever want to look at another rotten banana peel —or coffee grounds—again!!"

Mr. Leeds and Willoughby and I drove around the area near the store for hours, in the expectation that the robot would return to the store for more goods. Mr. Leeds hoped to salvage the inventory robot, which did not come cheap. Willoughby hoped to salvage Willoughby. Finally, though, about three in the morning we all gave up, seeing robots in every lamp post and mail box we passed. My place was nearby, so I suggested they come up to stretch their legs and have coffee.

"I should've become a plumber," Mr. Leeds was saying as he stared into his cup. "My father was a plumber. Plumbers have it made—when it's time to knock off, that's it. You don't see them taking other people's sinks home with them." he sighed. "But, no, not me. When dad died, I had to go take what he left me and put it in a department store."

"My father's a farmer," I said softly. I poured a belt of whiskey into my coffee and offered the bottle to Mr. Leeds. He upended the bottle and took a big swig, watched by a gaping Willoughby. Then he wiped the bottle with his sleeve and set it on the table.

"Good coffee," he remarked.

"Uncle!" Willoughby protested. "You know Aunt Marian doesn't like you to drink!"

"He's *her* nephew, you know," Leeds said wearily to me.

Willoughby, his face aflame, grabbed the bottle and took a gulp, choking and sloshing some on his jacket. "It's...good," he managed to sputter unconvincingly. "Puts hair on your...."

We were interrupted by the sound of the building fire alarm going off

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and, a moment later, by the scream of sirens. "What's happening?" Willoughby shrieked.

We all rushed to the window and looked down at the street. A couple of yellow fire trucks were coming in fast, but there wasn't any smoke to be seen. We were on the tenth floor, with two more floors above, but there wasn't anything to be seen up there either.

"Shall we depart, gentlemen?" Leeds asked just as the ear-splitting alarm stopped. By now the street was full of black and whites, all jockeying for position. A crowd was forming, and fire engines were still arriving. I noticed a cherry picker being given the spot of honor next to the building.

And then, as I gazed down at the pavement below, I realized why they were there.

"Oh, no," I breathed. "No-no-no-no."

"What?" Willoughby asked hysterically. "Are we burning? Is it too late?"

"What the hell is that?" Leeds asked.

We were staring down at a metallic cylinder with eight long arms, which was working its way up the side of the building, hanging onto the underside of the fire escapes. I could see the tensible arms stretching and then retracting at each floor, drawing the robot in the red tassled cap ever upward. And it was carrying something...a pinkish sack, it first appeared. Lights had started appearing in the neighboring buildings, illuminating the scene—the sack had legs and long brown hair. Up went the tentacle...up went the robot...up went....

"Isn't that a woman?" Leeds asked, his bald head sweating.

"Irene!" Willoughby and I yelled together.

My heart hammering, I ran into the hall and stepped out onto the fire escape. The cold December air quickened my responses as I dashed down to intercept them, vaguely aware of the whir-whirring of the helicopters above. I remembered the request that I'd made to the robot—I'd said that I wanted Irene—and now the robot was bringing her to me. But there were stairs in front of my building, and so it was coming up the only other way it could—under the fire escape ladders!!

"Shoot the robot!" Willoughby was calling from my apartment window. "Shoot off its tentacles! What do we pay you...." There were some muffled words I didn't understand and then silence, almost immediately replaced by crowd noises as I hopped, swiveled and ran down the metal ladders.

Irene was wearing pink flannel pajamas, a single wire curler in her hair. She hung there, limp, in the creature's grasp. Was she injured? Dead? As the robot paused near the seventh floor fire escape—where I was—to protract an arm towards the next floor, I saw Irene's eyes flutter open. She saw me, murmured "Leo...." and then suddenly looked down and screamed. As she wriggled violently, it seemed to me

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that the robot was losing its grip on her.

"Irene!" I called. "Don't move! I'm coming!" The robot swung up another floor with her. I ran up and found myself almost even with them.

Irene clung to the robot's two front arms. "Leo," she moaned.

The robot clicked. "Leo? You are Leo Wallace?"

"Yes," I panted. "Leo Wallace."

"Ho. Ho. Ho." The robot hung there suspended eight floors up with the girl I adored. "I am Santa Claus' helper. You have been a good boy."

"Put her down," I pleaded. "And do it carefully and slowly—she's fragile merchandise."

"Where is your Christmas stocking, Leo Wallace?" the robot intoned. "The red model is for your Christmas stocking. Except it is in pink. Will you accept the pink model?"

"Oh, God, yes—yes!" I tore off my shoe, ignoring a hysterical shriek from the crowd below. Then I waved my sock in front of me. "Here's my Christmas stocking, Santa!"

The robot hesitated. "You are sure that you will take the pink model? Perhaps I should speak to your mommy and daddy."

"I *love* the pink model!" I bawled.

The robot lowered itself a few inches. "Okay," it said. "Catch."

Actually it didn't throw Irene at me. It tossed her a few inches into my arms, and we crumpled up together on the fire escape, shaking violently.

Willoughby and Leeds appeared on the tenth floor fire escape. "Are you all right, darling?" Willoughby called.

We didn't say anything for a few long moments as I held her in my arms until her trembling changed to just shivering. A moist coldness on my bare foot brought me to the realization that it was starting to snow. The robot hung opposite us, clicking. "Yes," I finally called up, taking off my jacket and wrapping it around her shoulders, "she's all right, Willoughby."

Suddenly Irene giggled. "Did you really ask to have me in your Christmas stocking?"

The robot began clicking faster. "Willoughby...Willoughby...."

I heard a gasp as the robot swung itself upward again. "Come on," I said to Irene, helping her up. "Let's see what Willoughby asked for."

We ascended the two stories quickly, and then we went in through the hall fire escape door. They were there in my apartment—Willoughby, Leeds, and the robot. No doubt the boys in blue would be arriving any moment.

The robot was advancing on Willoughby, a single tentacle outstretched with something shiny on it. "Stop it!" Willoughby hollered. "It's dangerous!"

"Come here, Santa," I said. The ridiculous figure, its beard in tatters, swiveled and rolled up to me.

"Have you been a good boy?" it asked, still holding the diamond engagement ring towards Willoughby.

"Let me see that." Leeds took the

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ring, still bearing its Leeds Department Store tag. "This disappeared from the store a couple of days ago," he said thoughtfully.

"Oh, Willoughby," Irene cried in horror. "You shouldn't have!"

Willoughby gulped and took a few steps forward. "I made a wish," he said, laughing weakly. "Like the others. Irene and I had just become engaged. I saw this...ring. I never thought...."

Leeds leaned over to punch the playback button on the robot's neck. "Item XZ3872," he said.

Willoughby's voice could be heard even over the growing hubbub in the hall. "'Take diamond ring XZ3872 from Jewelry and put it in with the leather man's coat 48M42, size 36-short. Charge merchandise to Advertising. After completion, destroy the order!"

Willoughby's eyes were bulging. "The machine is obviously defective. The whole city knows it's defective. It has to be—otherwise, you wouldn't have been able to play that back, don't you see?" he grabbed my arm. "You see that, don't you, Leo?"

I nodded. "I see everything." Next to me, I heard Mr. Leeds chuckle and then break into belly-shaking laughter.

There was a loud knock at the door followed by an official-sounding "Police Department—is everyone all right?" Mr. Leeds, barely able to walk, tottered to the door and let in the police, several firemen, two ambulance attendants, and a whole slew of reporters. Willoughby stood there, white as Frosty the snowcone.

One of the policemen took a long skewerlike instrument from a tool case and passed it through an opening in the robot's side. Now paralyzed, the robot was left with us until a truck could arrive to return it to its parent company for repairs.

It was nearly an hour later before everyone was gone, and, by then, Mr. Leeds was almost in control of himself. He had been tossing the ring up and catching it as he waited for the crowd to clear, over and over. Finally he asked softly, "Where's the rest of the stuff, Willoughby?"

"At m...my place," he stammered. "Some of it—I sold some of it, too. Look, Uncle, I was going to inherit the business. I had to live up to a certain standard, and you didn't pay me enough. So I gave myself a little advance now and then. It really was mine, after all. Not yet, maybe, but it would be. You know...I'm not a crook."

"Not any more, Willoughby," Mr. Leeds said genially. "From now on you're an honest man. An unemployed honest man."

Willoughby's voice rose. "But it was mine! Mine!"

A Robotics, Inc., driver knocked at the apartment door. "This is it?" he asked, sleepy-eyed as he stared at the fallen robot. "Hell of a mess for one lousy inventory robot."

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"A hell of a mess," Leeds echoed. His voice hardened as he turned towards Willoughby. "Good-bye, Willoughby."

Willoughby moved into the hall, towards the open elevator, the robot wheeled just ahead of him, and got in. "I'll tell Aunt Marian!" he shouted just as the door closed.

"You do that," Leeds said, laughing. "God, I wonder what this will do to our insurance rates. I wonder why I don't give a damn." He shook his head and then turned to me. "Leo, do you like being a store tec?"

"It's a job," I answered slowly, wondering if he blamed me for not catching Willoughby earlier—or for the robot.

He tossed the ring up and caught it a few more times. "There seems to be an opening on the managerial staff," he said. "I was impressed with the way you handled the matter of the Jennings baby. Come see me in a few days, and we'll talk about it." He moved towards the elevator, chuckling to himself. When the doors opened again, he got on and turned towards Irene and me. "Here," he said, tossing the ring to me. "See if you can put this to some good use." Laughing to himself as I stood there, open-mouthed, he pushed the elevator button and the doors closed.

"It fits per...per...perfectly," Irene stammered when I had slipped the ring on her finger.

"My place or yours?" I asked softly.

She looked up at me, wide-eyed. "My place...?"

"Idaho or Montana? I've got to meet your mother, and you've got to meet my folks. Where shall we go first?"

Her cheeks glowed. "Montana!" she exclaimed. "Oh, Montana!"

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Books

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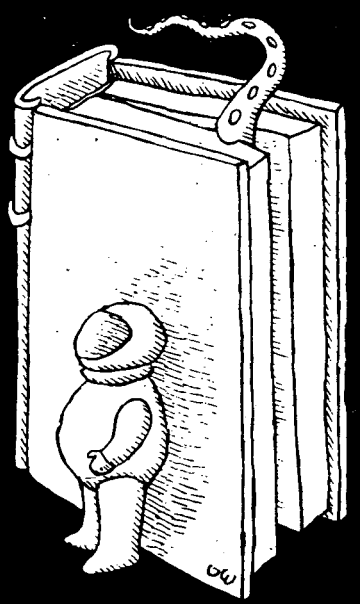

Songs From the Stars, Norman Spinrad. Simon & Schuster, $11.95

San Diego Lightfoot Sue and Other Stories, Tom Reamy. Earthlight Publishers, $14.95.

Golem^{100}, Alfred Bester. Simon & Schuster, $11.95

Survey of Science Fiction Literature, Frank N. Magill, Ed. Salem Press, $200.

Changeling, Roger Zelazny. Ace, $6.95

Norman Spinrad, once the author of rough-hewn but emotionally powerful books like *The Men in The Jungle* and *Bug Jack Barron*, and of that flashy tour de force, *The Iron Dream*, is now exploring another mode in *Songs From the Stars*. Having devoted much of his earlier work to bitter criticisms of the world in which he found himself, he is now proposing an alternate society: a quieter, happier way to live, with things pretty much in social balance, and time for parties.

It's a trial model, literally; a small pocket of humanity has survived a global holocaust, lives organized into tribes on the western side of the mountains, with the east a radioactive, silent hell, and is constantly conscious that its long-term viability remains to be determined. The tribes are organized by social utility; there are messengers, tinkers, moral preceptors, etc., whose service is to the entire society.

Clear Blue Lou, the perfect master, is an Aquarian who gets called in to restore good vibes when it appears that one tribe or another is disturbing the balance. Sunshine Sue, head of the

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Word of Mouth communications network, runs an organization of people on bicycles carrying the latest news. People seem to be far less ready to bite and scratch each other—perhaps because they get drugged up or boozed so often—than we are. There is a general dedication to using only technologies based on muscle, sun, wind and water; when the Lightning commune appears to have verged too close to Black Science with its latest line of products, everybody assumes that the matter will be settled through binding arbitration via Lou, rather than by war or mob actions.

On balance, it's kind of an attractive picture...or would be, if there really were drugs that just do their thing and then clear out of your system without having done any harm, and if drugging were simply a matter of recreational choice, rather than a habit.

Well, be that as it may; we keep hearing that chemistry has developed such substances. As I recall, heroin and methadone were first marketed that way. Anyhow—

The problem is that the culture, ostensibly wedded to this pastoral ideal, actually needs people like the Lightnings to sneak in such enabling details as electronic circuitry and small mechanical devices requiring advanced metallurgy, or the apparent ecotechnologies won't work very well.

Spinrad doesn't make a point of my pet particular case, because I don't think he knows just how elaborate a technological backup it takes to build a bicycle wheel capable of 30 mph hour after hour over dirt roads, but even that fits in; the culture has to wink an eye at reality in order to be able to claim it's in balance with Nature. Similarly, I rather think the tanks and pumps required to re-compress the helium in the wings of his flying machines would inevitably outweigh the lifting power, so the idyllic picture of Clear Blue Lou pedaling his airscrew-equipped soarer from place to place can't exist. But *if* it could, it would be only one more instance in Lou's, and Sue's, awareness that this paradise actually depends on trafficking with the devil.

That turns out to be a fellow named Harker, boss of an enclave of dedicated technocrats hidden beyond the mountains, who have been filtering the necessary goods out to the Lightnings, and who are building a rocket to go up to the Big Ear, the long-abandoned space station built for the purpose of receiving interstellar messages.

The tensions that Spinrad has built into the culture come to fruition when Lou and Sue wind up at the Big Ear with Harker, where it turns out that there is a library of recorded incoming data, that it can teach humankind to live a natural life, but that bringing the information back to the tribes means a prima facie confession of the blackest sort of sin.

So one of the nicest things about this book is that Spinrad has been

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aware from the start that simple pastorality can't in fact be supported by simple pastoral cultures; what he proposes isn't the sort of fool's paradise that some other writers have conjured up, but a system that requires very careful compromises, much vigilance, and constant teetering on the brink of going overboard in one direction or another. Despite its fantasy bicycles—which, by the way, Simon & Schuster's copyeditors keep insisting are "peddled," when what they mean is "pedaled"—this is a very real place.

I apologize for taking so long to bring you this word, but the short stories of Tom Reamy, plus biographical material and some very good commentary by Harlan Ellison, et al, are now available as *San Diego Lightfoot Sue and Other Stories*, from Earthlight Publishers, 5538 Jackson, Kansas City, MO 64130. You can order the book direct or through a store; it's very well manufactured and attractively designed; trust me it's worth having at the price. ($14.95. For $25, you can have the special slipcased edition autographed by Ellison).

You can't have it autographed by Reamy, of course. There will never be any more stories from Tom, except for a piece in *The Last Dangerous Visions* and one in George R.R. Martin's *New Voices* series.

The stories include many from this magazine, and then some that are rewritten screenplays, and some from semiprofessional media or from original anthologies you may have missed.

It's not really possible to convey the flavor of Reamy's fiction by attempting to describe it. If it were, Reamy wouldn't have been worth remembering, and the stories wouldn't be worth collecting. But if you ever read as much as one of them—the title story, or "Twilla" or "Dinosaurs," for instance—you know that this was a writer of uncommon and spellbinding individuality. Even his mediocre work, and we all do that from time to time, had the flavor, and flashes of Tom's peculiar genius. Go through the necessary moves to obtain this book; it'll have a salutary effect on you.

Golem^{100} is a bad book. It will infuriate you particularly if you become involved with the characters and their problems, which you may easily do. Three-quarters of the way through, Bester throws overboard everything he has built to that point, lapses into incoherence rather than pyrotechnics, kills off characters he had promised to shepherd safely through genuine troubles, and just generally bushes up his performance.

I can't understand this. In an alternate draft of this column, I spent five pages detailing how I think a writer as capable and charming as Alfred Bester could in effect repudiate everything he has ever shown us about storytelling. I spent another few pages looking for

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signs that he is actually producing something even more satisfactory in the way of craftsmanship or art. It isn't there. The final fourth of this book is a collection of words and images thrown at you to make you think the book is still going on, and that's what it is, and all it is.

Coming on the heels of what Heinlein did in *The Number of The Beast*, this is one of the most dismaying reading experiences I've had in recent weeks. And that, too, was the subject of a couple of thousand words of essay in an earlier draft. But that's all thanatopsis, it turns out, and I have spared you the details if not the essence of my consequent depression. What this book desperately needed was for Alfred Bester to have a series of long, strong, nuts-and-bolts talks with the author.

(Cordwainer) "Smith's stories are not about how the future will be, but about how it may be remembered." Yes. Yes! *Yes!* Exactly so.

This insight, by Gary K. Wolfe in his essay on *The Best of Cordwainer Smith*, is the high point so far of my reading in *Survey of Science Fiction Literature*, a five volume(!) reference set containing 513 essays, of approximately 2000 words each, on the major science fiction novels and story collections since *Frankenstein*. The work of 280 authors is represented, covering not only 150 years of literature but contributions from Argentina, Brazil, China, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, France, the GDR, West Germany, Hungary, Italy, Japan, Norway, Poland, Romania, Sweden, Uruguay, the USSR, and Yugoslavia, in addition to the English-speaking nations.

Thirteen rather well-chosen consultants helped editor Frank N. Magill and his associate, Keith Nelson, draw up the list of titles to be included. One hundred and thirty essayists, and eight translators, then worked to write the book.

It contains errors, both typographical and factual. (Eric Temple "Belle," "Cashier" O'Neill, *Galaxy* Magazine was founded in 1952, Algis Budrys is an English author, etc., etc.) But it's not the purpose of this work to be definitive; its purpose is to provide, in reasonably compact and handy form, a complete picture of the extent and nature of science fiction everywhere in the world since 1818. It is instantly indispensable.

Entries are alphabetical by title, beginning with Janez Mencinger's 1893 Yugoslavian novel, *Abadon*, on through *The Absolute at Large*, *Across the Zodiac*, *Ada of Ardor*, *Adam Link—Robot*, *Aelita*, *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan*, *Alas, Babylon*, *The Alteration*, *Analogue Men*...on to *The World of Null-A*, *Xipéhuz*, *The Year of the Quiet Sun*, *You Shall Know Them*, *A Zecea Lume*, and *Zone Null*. Authors covered, and indexed alphabetically in Volume 5 with their associated titles, begin

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with Edwin A. Abbott and Kobo Abe, and end with Ivan Yefremov, Evgeny Zamyatin, and Roger Zelazny.

The essayists are selected appropriately for the work or the author. Thus, Sam Moskowitz writes the essay on *Adam Link—Robot*, and three different English critics tackle Budrys. Oddly enough, the result is at least acceptable. When Vladimir Gakov writes on the Strugatskys' *Far Rainbow*, the unaccustomed inside viewpoint pays extraordinary dividends. Beverly Friend's critique of Joanna Russ' *The Female Man* is the first coherent and reasonable statement on that book I've ever seen. It's a potentially dangerous method of selection, and yet it works.*

It's beyond hoping that all the essays should be of equal quality, or that their judgments should invariably be pleasing. Some are almost hopelessly "academic" pompous, tendentious, and, what is worse, fundamentally thin because their authors haven't the foggiest notion of how commercial realities can be reflected in what they mistake for purely literary considerations. (Of all the "academics" extant, Martin Harry Greenberg has the best handle on that situation, but isn't represented in this volume). These faults are balanced by other essayists whose slapdash informality or scholarship *manque* veer just as far in the other direction. The net result is that any given critique is sure to infuriate someone who rightly or wrongly feels his own judgment to be more authoritative and evenhanded.

But that's not who this book is for, although we can all profit greatly from reading it front to back, assuming we can find the necessary month off from all other activities. This book is for the people in academe and in the libraries and research teams who need a thumbnail picture of the field, or who know all about the Golden Age but never heard of any Uruguayans writing science fiction. The slight factual errors are checkable. The typographical errors abound, but seem relatively harmless ("devine" for divine) or detectable.

A truly overwhelming task has not only been conceived of, funded, and organized in one of the sensible manners, but actually carried through. Not every choice is unchallengeable—if we are going to have an essay on Brunner's *The Squares of The City*, then where are the essays on Kornbluth's *Takeoff* and *Not This August*, particularly since the essay on *The Best* of C.M. Kornbluth is one of the notably patronizing ones, and *The Syndic*, while well treated, is less of a book than the other two novels. But we are talking here about a book whose total range is amazingly wide, and whose total value is incalculable.

Of course, at $200, and a library discount of $10, it better had be. Furthermore, no cheap edition is pres-

I'm paradoxically, an American author. But with very strong Anglophilic tendencies in literature, so even in Magill's error there's a certain rough justice.

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ently contemplated. What is contemplated is a companion set on fantasy, with presumably the same sort of pricetag. However, let's say the two sets together eventually cost you $450. At that price you make yourself an immediate expert, with more capsulized information at your fingertips then almost all of the people who have been recognized as experts to date. Salem's address is Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 07632. Salem is an established reference publisher with good standards of book manufacture, and if you can think of any reasonable excuse to make the investment, I recommend you do so.

Roger Zelazny's *The Changeling* is 40,000 words of very pretty trade paperback, illustrated by Esteban Maroto, and I rather wish there had been a few more words. Perhaps there were; there appear to be places where segments that ought to have occurred are simply missing, rather than skimped. Conversely, there are places where Ace's designer has padded out the illustrations by blowing up or flopping detail from artwork already shown on other pages, an Ace habit which disserves the illustrator whom they had been so careful to cite as a selling point.

But the author triumphs over the editing (?) as does the graphic artist. This is very good science fantasy, counterpointing the lives of two attractive male heroes who, as babies, were exchanged between a magical milieu and our mundane one.

Cafe guitarist Daniel Chain, ostensibly the son of a hard-driving engineer, is actually the son of Det Morson, destroyed wizard. Mark Marakson, wondersmith in a Medieval peasant culture founded on the technology of magic, is Chain's real son. Daniel, with the dragon birthmark on his forearm, saddens his "father" by showing no interest whatever in technology, but gets along all right, plying his trade, inadvertently doing small magiks no one notices in the smoky darkness of two-o'clock joints. But Mark, by introducing such damnable items as waterwheels and steam cars into his culture, is threatening reality at its very foundations.

The situation gets worse when Mark, mobbed and stoned by the villagers, flees to a long-lost ruined city left from the days when magic won out over technology in a climactic war, and acquires a computer-taught education and control of the buried automatic factories. There is nothing for it but to bring back a sorcerer to forestall him.

So old Mor, who led the defeat of Det—and who was Det's father and Daniel's grandfather, though the text never stresses this point—comes to Earth and with his last breaths sends Daniel back home. There in fact the two young men do come into contention—partly because both of them

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In which a farmer changes the course of a river and discovers a beautiful water spirit. As we all know, or soon will, to love such a spirit means despair.

The River Maid

BY

JANE YOLEN

There was once a rich farmer named Jan who decided to expand his holdings. He longed for the green meadow that abutted his farm with a passion that amazed him. But a swift river ran between the two. It was far too wide and far too deep for his cows to cross.

He stood on the river bank and watched the water hurtle over its rocky course.

"I could build a bridge," he said aloud. "But, then, any fool could do that. And I am no fool."

At his words the river growled, but Jan did not heed it.

"No!" Jan said with a laugh, "I shall build no bridge across this water. I shall make the river move aside for me." And so he planned how he would dam it up, digging a canal along the outer edge of the meadow, and so allow his cows the fresh green grass.

As if guessing Jan's thoughts, the river roared out, tumbling stones in its rush to be heard. But Jan did not understand it. Instead, he left at once to go to the town where he purchased the land and supplies.

The men Jan hired dug and dug for weeks until a deep ditch and a large dam had been built. Then they watched as the river slowly filled up behind the dam. And when, at Jan's signal, the gate to the canal was opened, the river was forced to move into its new course and leave its comfortable old bed behind.

At that, Jan was triumphant. He laughed and turned to the waiting men. "See!" he called out loudly, "I am not just Jan the Farmer. I am Jan the River Tamer. A wave of my hand, and the water must change its way."

His words troubled the other men. They spat between their fingers and

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made other signs against the evil eye. But Jan paid them no mind. He was the last to leave the river's side that evening and went home well after dark.

The next morning Jan's feeling of triumph had not faded and he went down again to the path of the old river which was now no more than mud and mire. He wanted to look at the desolation and dance over the newly dried stones.

But when he got to the river's old bed, he saw someone lying face-up in the center of the waterless course. It was a girl clothed only in a white shift that clung to her body like a skin.

Fearing her dead, Jan ran through the mud and knelt by her side. He put out his hand but could not touch her. He had never seen anyone so beautiful.

Fanned out about her head, her hair was a fleece of gold, each separate strand distinguishable. Fine gold hairs lay molded on her forearms and like wet down upon her legs. On each of her closed eyelids a drop of river water glistened and reflected back to him his own staring face.

At last Jan reached over and touched her cheek, and at his touch, her eyes opened wide. He nearly drowned in the blue of them.

He lifted the girl up in his arms, never noticing how cold her skin or how the mud stuck nowhere to her body or her shift, and he carried her up onto the bank. She gestured once towards the old river bank and let out a single mewling cry. Then she curled in towards his body, nestling, and seemed to sleep.

Not daring to wake her again, Jan carried her home and put her down by the hearth. He lit the fire, though it was late spring and the house already quite warm. Then he sat by the sleeping girl and stared.

She lay in a curled position for some time. Only the slow pulsing of her back told him that she breathed. Then, as dusk settled about the house, bringing with it a half-light, the girl gave a sudden sigh and stretched. Then she sat up and stared. Her arms went out before her as if she were swimming in the air. Jan wondered for a moment if she were blind.

Then the girl leaped up in one fluid movement and began to sway, to dance upon the hearthstones. Her feet beat swiftly and she turned round and round in dizzying circles. She stopped so suddenly that Jan's head still spun. He saw that she was now perfectly dry except for one side of her shift; the left hem and skirt were still damp and remained molded against her.

"Turn again," Jan whispered hoarsely, suddenly afraid.

The girl looked at him and did not move.

When he saw that she did not understand his tongue, Jan walked over to her and led her back to the fire. Her hand was quite cold in his. But she smiled shyly up at him. She was small, only chest high, and Jan himself was not a large man. Her skin, even in the

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darkening house, was so white it glowed with a fierce light. Jan could see the rivulets of her veins where they ran close to the surface, at her wrists and temples.

He stayed with her by the fire until the heat made him sweat. But though she stood silently, letting the fire warm her first one side and then the other, her skin remained cold, and the left side of her shift would not dry.

Jan knelt down before her and touched the damp hem. He put his cheek against it.

"Huttah!" he cried at last. "I know you now. You are a river maid. A water spirit. I have heard of such. I believed in them when I was a child."

The water girl smiled steadily down at him and touched his hair with her fingers, twining the strands round and about as if weaving a spell.

Jan felt the touch, cold and hot, burn its way down the back of his head and along his spine. He remembered with dread all the old tales. To hold such a one against her will meant death. To love such a one meant despair.

He shook his head violently and her hand fell away. "How foolish," Jan thought. "Old wives and children believe such things. I do not love her, beautiful as she is. And as for the other, how am I to know what is her will? If we cannot talk the same tongue, I can only guess her wants." He rose and went to the cupboard and took out bread and cheese and a bit of salt fish which he put before her.

The water maid ate nothing. Not then or later. She had only a few drops of water before the night settled in.

When the moon rose, the river maid began to pace restlessly about the house. Wall to wall, she walked. She went to the window and put her hand against the glass. She stood by the closed door and put her shoulder to the wood, but she would not touch the metal latch.

It was then that Jan was sure of her. "Cold iron will keep her in." He was determined she would stay at least until the morning.

The river maid cried all the night, a high keening that rose and fell like waves. But in the morning she seemed accommodated to the house and settled quietly to sleep by the fire. Once in a while, she would stretch and stand, the damp left side of her shift clinging to her thigh. In the half-light of the hearth she seemed even more beautiful than before.

Jan left a bowl of fresh water near the fire, with some cress by it, before he went to feed the cows. But he checked the latch on the windows and set a heavy iron bar across the outside of the door.

"I will let you go tonight," he promised slowly. "*Tonight*," he said, as if speaking to a child. But she did not know his language and could not hold him to his vow.

By the next morning, he had forgotten making it.

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For a year Jan kept her. He grew to like the wavering sounds she made as she cried each night. He loved the way her eyes turned a deep green when he touched her. He was fascinated by the blue veins that meandered at her throat, along the backs of her knees, and laced each small breast. Her mouth was always cold under his.

Fearing the girl might guess the working of window or gate, Jan fashioned iron chains for the glass and an ornate grillwork for the door. In that way, he could open them to let in air and let her look out at the sun and moon and season's changes. But he did not let her go. And as she never learned to speak with him in his tongue and thereby beg for release, Jan convinced himself that she was content.

Then it was spring again. Down from the mountains came the swollen streams, made big with melted snow. The river maid drank whole glasses of water now, and put on weight. Jan guessed that she carried his child, for her belly grew, she moved slowly and no longer tried to dance. She sat by the window at night with her arms raised and sang strange, wordless tunes, sometimes loud and sometimes soft as a cradle song. Her voice was as steady as the patter of the rain, and underneath Jan fancied he heard a growing strength. His nights became as restless as hers, his sleep full of watery dreams.

The night of the full moon, the rain beat angrily against the glass as if insisting on admission. The river maid put her head to one side, listening. Then she rose and left her window place. She stretched and put her hands to her back, then traced them slowly around her sides to the front. She moved heavily to the hearth and sat. Bracing both hands on the stones behind her, she spread her legs, crooked at the knees.

Jan watched as her belly rolled in great waves under the tight white shift.

She threw her head back, gasped at the air, and then, with a great cry of triumph, expelled the child. It rode a gush of water between her legs and came to rest at Jan's feet. It was small and fishlike, with a translucent tail. It looked up at him with blue eyes that were covered with a veil of skin. The skin lifted once, twice, then closed again as the child slept.

Jan cried because it was a beast.

At that very moment, the river outside gave a shout of release. With the added waters from the rain and snow, it had the strength to push through the earth dam. In a single wave, that gathered force as it rolled, it rushed across the meadow, through the farmyard and barn, and overwhelmed the house. It broke the iron gates and grilles as if they were brittle sticks, washing them away in its flood. Then it settled back into its old course, tumbling over familiar rocks and rounding the curves it had cut in its youth.

When the neighbors came the next

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I've always believed in taking care of myself. But exercise and diet are just part of keeping fit. Get regular cancer checkups.

American Cancer Society

This space contributed as a public service.

day to assess the damage, they found no trace of the house or of Jan.

"Gone," said one.

"A bad end," said another.

"Never change a river," said a third.

They spat through their fingers and made other signs against evil. Then they went home to their own fires and gave it no more thought.

But a year later, in a pocket of the river, in a quiet place said to house a great fish with a translucent tail, an inquisitive boy found a jumble of white bones.

His father and the other men guessed the bones to be Jan's, and they left them to the river instead of burying them.

When the boy asked why, his father said, "Huttah! Hush, boy, and listen."

The boy listened and heard the river playing merrily over the bones. It was a high, sweet, bubbling song. And anyone with half an ear could hear that the song, though wordless, or at least in a language unknown to men, was full of freedom and a conquering joy.

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"Congratulations, J. H.! We believe we've worked out a technique whereby you can take it with you!"

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Lt. Brig Gallo of the GLA Police Murder Division is here confronted with a series of bizarre killings, in which the victims — who have their heads bashed in by a robot doll — are childhood acquaintances of Gallo's. A coincidence?

Batteries Not Included

BY

RON GOULART

The controlled earthquake, as previously announced, began at 10:16 on the morning of Wednesday, January 13, 2010. It was well within the acceptable magnitude range and shook the entire Greater Los Angeles area for just under four minutes.

The first of the Basher murders took place approximately thirteen hours later.

Lt. Brig Gallo of the GLA Police's Murder Division didn't figure out the connection between the two events until three days later. By that time two more murders had occurred.

When the report of the first killing came in, Gallo, a rough-hewn and swarthy man in his late twenties, was sitting in his shatterproof office high up the Police Tower and watching his partner goose the coffee robot.

"Goshdarn thing," complained Sgt. Roscoe Yarbro as he thrust his metallic right thumb again into the underside of the dispensing 'bot, "dang earthquake's gone an' jangled him all flooey, Brig."

Setting his dikmike on his glaztop desk, Gallo suggested, "Use an elec screwdriver."

"Lookie, this here new arm set the GLAPD back 108,000 bucks. I'm gonna use her ever' chancet I get." This time the robot sizzled, yellow eyes blinking, when Yarbro poked in his electrified thumb. "I kin do mos' anythin' with this arm. Shoot 'em, stun 'em, freeze 'em. I can repair skycars, vidwalls, brainstims an' —"

"Easier to trot down the hall into Brutality and get some syncaf there."

"All the 'bots on this here level are on the fritz," Yarbro explained. "Goshdarn quakes does it ever' time. I sure don't give a hootanholler what

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that there Dr. Penzler claims. Ask me, I'd druther go back to the old unpredictable —"

"By letting out underground pressure this way, we avoid the Big Quake." Gallo swiveled in his tin chair so he didn't have to look at his chunky cyborg partner. "And how come you're talking this way?"

"Wicha way?"

"Like a hick."

"Oh, that's ona counter my night school experience, Brig." said the police sergeant, scratching at his ribs. "I been takin' me a Roots class two nights a week. I done tol' you 'bout it afore. See, it turns out I had one of them classless, rootless Cal voices, so they tol' —"

"You were born and raised in CalSouth. You're bound to talk that way."

"It's too dang dull, too stereotypic. Instead, I got me a style of jawin' what harks back to my root sources, see. Back in the Wild West my kin useter —"

"You still sound like a vidwall sodkicker who —"

Three globes of red light began flashing up under the domed ceiling.

Lt. Gallo leaned forward, pushed at a toggle on his desk top. "Gallo, MD. What is it?"

A large rectangular section of the wall opposite his desk turned black. Then a picture formed on it.

"Murder in the Santa Monica Sector," a voice out of a wall grid told him. "Here's a prelim scan from one of the patrol 'bots."

Giving up on the syncaf, Yarbro trotted over to watch the remote vidpix coming in. "Dang, there's a messy killin' fer sure."

The victim was an old man, eighty at least by the look of him. He was sprawled on his back across his thermobed, his various wires and plaztubes tangled into an intricate cat's craddle. The right side of his head had been smashed in.

"Thornycroft, Arthur," said the wall grid. "Alias Pop Thornycroft, alias Old Pop—"

"Pop Thornycroft!" Gallo left his chair, moved nearer the screen. "He's not a crook, he used to run the Junk Food franchise place in the Pasadena Sector where I grew up. Nice old guy, bit goofy."

"...alias Poppsy, alias Old Man Thornycroft."

"We've got enough nicknames," said Gallo, impatient. "Give us some details."

"Body discovered by clean-up robot at 7:01 this morning, 14 Jan 2010. Robot exclaimed, 'Yumpin' yimminy, he bane dead I betcher. I oughter —"

"Skip that, tell me exactly where Pop is."

"Thornycroft has been a resident of the Augmented Life Stronghold in the Santa Monica Sector since 16 Oct 2001. Was attached to a mechanical kidney, a heart amplifier, two brain

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stabilizers, a stomach by-pass feeder, and some gadget we haven't figured out yet. He died, according to prelim estimates, between 11 and 12 last night. Death caused by severe and repeated blows to the head by a blunt instrument as yet unidentified. Traces of granulated plaz of midnight-blue shade were found in the wound, larger fragments of the same stuff on thermobed and rugs. Plaz fragments are enroute to the Police Tower via Sgt. Mulrooney's bicycle and —"

"Bicycle? What the hell happened to the labvan?"

"Incapacitated, probably by the recent quake, sir."

"Any suspects?"

"Well, if it wasn't the quake, we —"

"Not about the van," said Gallo, "any suspects in the killing?"

"None."

"Okay, we'll be right over."

Yarbro snuffled. "Right over, Brig? We got all the pix we need an' the lab'll process all the evidence from the scene of the dang crime. Whyn't we just set a spell an' wait till —"

"I knew the old guy," Gallo told him. "I want to see first-hand what happened to him."

"Doggone. Guess I might as well tag along."

"I'd appreciate that."

A small unplanned quake awakened Gallo shortly before dawn on January 15. His bodyhug rubba bed commenced quivering, his humawake ballclock fell off its perch in his sleeping pit wall, smacked down to hit him in the ankle.

Over in her pit Gallo's wife screamed. "A real one, it's a real one! We'll all die and be swallowed by —"

"Relax, Tilda," he called, sitting up and massaging his ankle. He'd already glanced at the magnitude gauge in the pit wall, knew this wasn't the Big One. "It's only a minor shake."

"All the soothfluid's dripping out of my bed," she complained, her pit giving a down-a-well quality to her thin nasal voice. "And, oh, now my snackbot's going nutso and turning out dollar-size flapjacks to beat the band."

"He gets that way sometimes, quake related probably. I'll hop over and fix it for you."

"I don't want to drown in flapjacks, Brig."

"Coming, got to get my cazsuit on so —"

The emergency light at the lip of his six-foot-deep pit had commenced flashing.

Grunting, Gallo reached over to click on his wall pixphone screen.

A dead woman appeared on it. Plump, in her sixties, lying face-down beside an indoor fishpond. Something was wrong with the tiny mechanical fish; they were jumping high up out of the tinted water and diving back in with much splashing. Dozens of the little things, silver, gold, scarlet. The right side of the woman's head had

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been bashed in, there was blood ribboning across the decorative tiles.

Gallo, scowling, tilted his head to one side. Into the talkmike he said, "Give me a CU of the victim."

One of the robot patrolmen obliged, dollying in close to the head.

That confirmed what Gallo had suspected. "Damn, that's Mrs. Hazzen."

"Mrs. Alice Hazzen, age 61, resident of Fort Repose, Secure Senior Enclave, Ventura Sector," he was told.

"She was my Middle School Advisor," Gallo said. "This looks like the same pattern as the Thornycroft killing."

"It does, and we've found similar dark-blue plaz fragments scattered around the body."

One of the robot cops lowered his ball-shaped head into the picture, dangling it next to the crushed skull of Lt. Gallo's old school teacher. "Want to take a first-hand look at this one, sir?"

He shook his head. "Nope, I'll pass. I want to get over to the PD Tower and see what the Lab Wing's come up with," he said. "See if you can find anybody who saw or heard anything."

"Very good, sir."

Hanging up, Gallo quickly dressed and climbed up out of his pit. Their bedchamber was beaming too much artificial sunshine in. Gallo found himself perspiring, the floor sizzled slightly under his neoleather soles.

"How about my problem?" asked Tilda from down in her pit.

"You'll have to climb out, call the Fixit Bureau people," he advised, crouching at the edge of the pit. There were an awful lot of flapjacks piling up down there.

"They'll take a week to drag over here and then they'll stall around until —"

"Remember old Mrs. Hazzen?"

His wife's gaunt face looked blankly up at him. "Who? I hope she knows something about how to turn off flapjacks because —"

"Mrs. Hazzen, for Christ sake! She was our advisor when we went to Pasadena Sector Middle School."

Tilda shrugged her frail shoulders, her plyotop nearly slid off. "I don't live in the past as much as you do, Brig. Don't remember her at all."

"You'd think if you married your childhood sweatheart, she'd at least ... I've got to leave."

"Seeing Mrs. Hazzen to talk over old times?"

"Something like that." He left the room.

Paradoctor Kinyoobi turned on several parts of the near wall, then went shuffling toward it. "I do believe, Brig, we've solved at least a portion of your problem. Note Screen 16."

Gallo glanced up at the indicated vidscreen. "Fragments of plaz."

"From the site of the initial Basher slaying in —"

"Who's calling him the Basher?"

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"LATimes, SFChron, NBC, CBS, Time-Life and *Rolling Stone."*

Gallo puckered one cheek. "Okay, proceed."

"Screen 14 shows similar fragments from the scene of the Basher's second thrill kill in —"

"Who says he's doing this for thrills?"

"Why else?" inquired the diminutive chief of the Lab Wing. "No connection between the two victims."

"Sure, there is."

"Oh, so?"

"Well, I knew both of them. Pop Thornycroft ran the Junk Food restaurant near our school, Mrs. Hazzen was a teacher there. Advisor to both me and my wife, in fact."

"How is your lovely wife, by the way?"

"Lovely as ever."

"Only a coincidence, your being aquainted with the first two victims. My —"

"I'm hoping there won't be more than two victims."

Kinyoobi shook his little head. "Goofy killers, pattern guys, don't usually stop at a couple, Brig," he pointed out. "Look at Jack the Ripper or Maddog Anmar. That latter fellow got himself in the Guinness Book of —"

"Tell me about the plaz, doc."

"Coming to that, merely adding a little expert speculation along the way to stimulate you in the direction of a solution," said Kinyoobi. "Now, what do we have on Screen 13?"

"Pair of dark glasses, except they seem awful small next to that electrapen."

"Pen's there to indicate scale. They are tiny glasses. See Screen 9."

"A doll."

On that screen, which was a bit above Gallo's chest level, was a picture of a scowling little youth in a one-piece glistening night-black riotsuit. He wore black glasses, had high-standing silver hair and carried a platinum kilgun in one hand and a huge diamond-studded electraguitar in the other.

"Doll weighs, because of the mechanisms inside, nearly ten pounds. Sufficient, Brig, to bash in anyone's skonce if wielded with sufficient enthusiasm."

Gallo was studying Screen 9 now. It showed the carton the little robot doll came in. "'Blind Staggers, the World's Most Famous & Adored Folk Singer! He Sings! He Swings! He Plays 12 Beloved Hits! He Blasts Moving Targets! He Makes 15 Different Lewd Movements! Batteries Not Included.' Who the hell is Blind Staggers?"

"You're out of touch with our current culture. Blind Staggers, who is actually legally blind, is the current favorite of the 8 to 12 year old vidisc and vidcaz audience, male and female. His last vid album, entitled *I'm Gonna Stick It in Ya, Twist It Around' an' Watch Ya Bleed to Death, Pretty Mama!* won the Nobel Prize last month."

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"Must have missed the announcement." Gallo turned his back on the screens. "The weapon used in the two killings was one of these dolls, huh?"

"Two of them."

"Two?"

"One to bash in each head," explained Kinyoobi. "We've got fragments from two separate pairs of teenie-weenie glasses."

"Where are the dolls manufactured, someplace like China II?"

"China III actually, but they're designed and distributed by Fable Bros. in the Pasadena Sector."

"How many of the damn things have they sold in GLA?"

"267,000," Paradr. Kinyoobi replied.

Nodding, Gallo said, "Anything else you can tell me?"

"Note the charts on Screens 17 and 18."

Gallo glanced at the multicolor graphs. "You got some emanations off the plaz fragments?"

"We did," said Kinyoobi. "After numerous tests, many too complex for the lay mind to grasp, we are able to state without fear of contradiction that the dolls, both of them, were handled very recently by a white male between the ages of 25 and 35."

Gallo frowned. "But not by a kid?"

"Nope."

"Might mean the killer didn't borrow the dolls from his kids, but bought them or swiped them himself."

"That's one possible conclusion."

"Anything else?"

"That's all from me," said Kinyoobi, "but maybe you ought to talk to Emerzon in the Psych Tank. I know he's been working up some interesting theories about what's motivating the Basher."

"Have we had a full moon the past few nights?"

"Yes, quite an impressive one, even through the smog. Haven't you noticed?"

"No, but I know what Emerzon's theory'll be."

The next victim lived nearly seven minutes after the robot cops arrived.

Lt. Gallo didn't learn of this until 11:42 a.m. on January 16. His office wall informed him of the fact, then showed him the final moments of Dr. Franklin Tamboura's life.

The doctor was in private practice now, had offices in a fortified portion of the Venice Sector in a bubble house built over one of the old, now dry, canals.

A heavy-set Indian, he was slumped in his floating lucite chair, blood crusted on most of the right side of his head and face. His eyes snapped open, shut and opened as he murmured answers to the questioning mechanical cop.

"Who did this to you, sir?"

"I did ... but I shouldn't have done it to him ... so guilty all these years ... all of them ...."

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"You're saying this is suicide, Doctor?"

"Seemed such ... a fine idea ... implant a simple device ... cut down the crime rate ... create positive futures for so many young ... what a mistake ... carrying that thing ... guilty ...."

"Sir, forgive me for pointing out you seem to be wandering from the subject, which is certainly understandable under the circumstances. But can you give us any idea who assaulted you?"

"Poor boy ... always had such ... sensitive eyes ... never was quite sure about him ... but the tests ... must have been right ... and yet ... still they had good reason ... but carrying that awful thing inside him all ... more harm than I realized ... better if I'd never ... but they wouldn't stop ... even after I quit ... now ... too late ... much...."

That was all. He faded away into death, fell forward onto his white plaz desk.

"Doggone, we got to corral us this homber," commented Sgt. Yarbro, clutching at his cup of syncaf with his metal hand. "He can't keep abonkin' honest and decent folks —"

"Don't you know who he is?"

"Was," corrected the sergeant.

"Dr. Tamboura was the inventor of the whole IMP System." Gallo started to pace the office. "Christ, he must have performed thousands of implant operations back in the 1980s and 90s. When I was a kid in the Pasadena Sector, he had a fantastic lab setup there, all funded by the GLA government."

"You mean he's the waddie who up an' invented the Box?"

"It's not a box actually, despite what popular belief says," said Gallo. "It's a little sphere of microminiaturized stuff that's linked up with the brain in such a way that anybody carrying one in his skull simply can't commit a crime." He nodded at the screen where Dr. Tamboura had just died. "Despite what he preached in his last years, the IMP System's been a real help. It has cut down the crime rate, although in the last few years they've been using them only on convicted criminals."

"'At's right, they uster plant 'em in kids, too," Yarbro recalled. "Sure, 'at's somethin' my maw used as a threat on me. 'Keep bein' ornery, boy, an' I'll get 'em to stick a Box in yer headbone.' Plumb forgot about it."

"Actually the whole screening process was pretty well handled," said Gallo. "At our Middle School the advisors were in charge of recommending kids, kids who by their conduct had indicated they might grow up into criminals. Then those kids were sent on to Dr. Tamboura's facility for a very thorough series of tests. Despite what reformers have since charged about wholesale implanting, only about 10 percent of the kids tested ever got implants. And statistics show the crime rate really has dropped in areas bright enough to make use of the IMP."

Yarbro suddenly shivered, rubbing

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at his metal arm. "Somethin' like-a that must hurt somethin' fierce."

"The implanting process is supposed to be relatively painless, only requires local —"

"Naw, what I mean is oncet you're awearin' one of them gadgets in your grey matter," amplified his partner. "Ever' time you get a crooked or a antisocial impulse, 'at IMP knows it. Whammo! It shoots pain inter you."

"That's a damn effective way to teach. After a while anybody with an implant learns not to have violent or ciminal thoughts." Gallo stood up, wandered to a viewall. "Still don't understand why Tamboura changed, turned against one of the most effective determents we've got."

"Remarked, there in his last moments of life, as how he felt hisself a mite guilty," Yarbro reminded. "Plus which, I hear as how them IMPs gotta be checked out an' serviced alla time. So maybe he—"

"Not a lot. Once a year is all. An implant wearer has to report to his nearest IMP clinic, and they make any adjustments necessary, without even opening the skull."

Yarbro took in a great slurping swallow of syncaf. "You knew this Dr. Tamboura waddie, too, din't you?"

"Sure, most everybody in the Pasadena Sector knew him." Gallo watched skycars dodging each other out in the blurred late morning. "Fact is, I think getting interested in him and his work is what originally got me interested in police work. It was sort...." He snapped his finger, turned to face his cyborg partner. "The killer's got to be somebody who grew up where I did."

"You think the Basher was one of your boyhood buddies?"

"Sure, someone who knew Pop Thornycroft and Mrs. Hazzen and Dr. Tamboura," said Gallo as he ticked off the names on his fingers. "And I'll bet somebody with an anticrime implant."

"Huh?" Yarbro frowned, rubbing at his chin with his metal thumb knuckle. "Anybody what's got one of them dinguses in his noggin can't bonk in nobody's head. You couldn't nohow overcome the pain; it'd flatten you out afore you got anywheres near doin' the deed. 'At's how an IMP works."

"When it works."

"'Sides, the Basher didn't leave no trace on any of the security monitors at any of the murder sites. We don't even know how he ... whatta you mean when it works?"

"Come on." Gallo was running for a door panel.

The young woman was impressively fat. Her floating tin chair was obviously specially designed, and even then the air-support mechanism under the chair was making overworking noises. "Well, I recognize you," she said, smiling at Lt. Gallo. "I used to be Becky Danbridge then."

Gallo lowered himself into a styro wing chair facing the fat woman.

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"Oh, sure, we must have been in Middle School together."

The sixpod house was in one of the Low Trouble areas of the Pasadena Sector of GLA. Everything inside the livingpod was clean and bright, three different servos stood, watchful, at the edges of the room. The decorative garden strip outside the room was full of believable flowers and a realistic fake orange tree. The dusk was tinting everything a purplish brown.

Yarbro stayed on his feet, mechanical hand tucked into his opposite armpit. "Knows this one, too," he murmured to himself.

"It's too bad Randy isn't home," said Becky Domingus. "I know he always likes to see people from our old schools." She smiled again at Gallo, then up at his standing partner. "Randy doesn't hold a grudge against anyone. He adjusted to his status long ago, he's doing quite well." She attempted to cross her enormous legs, found it impossible.

"We'd like to see Randy."

"He's still working. Even with these new five-hour shifts set up by the Design Guild, he never comes home until he's put in eight or ten hours at Fable Bros."

Yarbro gave a knowing cough into his metal hand, gazed up at the lucite birds dangling from the domed ceiling of the darkening room.

"Randy designed those, too," Becky said, noticing Yarbro's glance. "He's really very clever, very gifted even-tempered person I've ever known. Some people might find him bland, but not me. I truly love my husband, Brig. Or should I call you lieutenant?"

"Might as well use Brig, Becky. So Randy's still out at the plant?"

"Yes, he pixed not more than an hour ago to tell me he was caught up in working out a new battery toy, a daredevil stunt one I think. Based on that fellow Suicide Smith who went over the ... is there something wrong, Brig?"

"Randy designed the Blind Staggers doll, too, didn't he?"

She nodded, chins wiggling, eyes taking on a troubled cast. "That was one of the most successful toys Fable's ever had. I tell you, when he's over there at his drawing board, he's absolutely brilliant. He designs the most clever things, builds the models all himself. You might think a man who's so even-tempered would be dull, but Randy is never that. And, let's face it, I'm darn lucky to have such a good-looking man for a husband. I always did think he was very attractive, back in Middle School even before ... even before."

Gallo leaned forward, lowered his voice. "About his IMP, Becky," he said. "We know Randy went in for his annual check-up on the morning of January 13. Did —"

"Yes, and I told him what an awful day to have to do something like that. The 13th is always unlucky, and then

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they went and scheduled one of those dreadful quakes for —"

"In checking out the Pasadena IMP clinic," Gallo went on, "we learned that, because of the big quake that morning, some of the medical robots who do the servicing there may have malfunctioned for a time. They're just now catching up with what happened, but it looks like as many as fifteen or twenty of the patients may not have been properly handled."

"I hope it wasn't Randy. He suffers enough already with those awful headaches."

"The IMP doesn't cause any pain unless —"

"Sure, I know what outsiders think," she told him with a quiet smile. "Except it really isn't that way. There's always pain for an IMP wearer, sometimes pretty bad pain even when he's not having an antisocial thought. One of the kinks in the system, although maybe that's not too high a price to pay for keeping out of trouble. I'm never sure if ... what sort of mistakes did those medix 'bots make?"

"There's a chance, which the clinic wasn't even aware of until we started digging into the matter, some of the IMP devices may have been turned off."

Becky gasped. "That's awful ... poor Randy might —"

"Have you noticed," asked Yarbro, "anything funny in his behavior since the 13th, ma'am?"

She shook her head negatively. "No, Sergeant, he's been his usual pleasant self. Randy's very gentle. Some people might classify him as dull, but I'm just very pleased to share my life with such a kind and easy-going man. If you didn't know him as well as I do, you might think he was —"

"Randy's been working late most nights since the 13th?" Gallo asked her.

"Well, he has, yes," she answered. "Although, as I told you, Randy really enjoys his work at Fable. Not that we don't have many happy hours at home together."

"You folks sack out in the same pit?" Yarbro asked.

A blush colored her massive face. "That's a very personal question, Sergeant."

"We'd sorta like to know anyhow, ma'am."

"As a matter of fact, we have seperate pods," she said, eyes downcast. "Randy never is able to sleep all that well, because of the headaches. So he has a pod of his own, with a sleep pit and a drawing board. Randy says some of his best designs were done when —"

"You wouldn't actually know then," said Gallo, rising, "if he left the house after you turned in?"

Her eyes followed him up. "No, I suppose not. I'm in my pit by eleven most nights, so I usually don't see Randy again till he's home from Fable the next evening. I like to sleep a bit late mornings."

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"We'll get over to the Fable plant now," Gallo said. "I'd appreciate it, Becky, if you don't let Randy know we're on our way over. Don't pix him."

"Something is wrong." She was struggling to get out of her chair.

Yarbro started over, metal arm outstretched. But a large servo with four hands beat him to it and hefted Randy Domingus' wife to her feet.

"So far this is simply a routine inquiry, Becky."

She followed them to the door. "Well, it was nice seeing you again, Brig," she said. "I hope...."

Gallo left without trying to finish the sentence for her.

At first he did seem very calm, sitting there at a slanted noryl board. Broad shoulders slightly hunched, pen end tapping against his strong chin. Randy Domingus was a good-looking man, handsome in the traditional way, hair dark and curly. There was, though, a slight pinched look to his face as you got closer. His eyes were guarded.

When the robot shop steward cleared his aluminum throat, Randy glanced up. "Brig Gallo," he said, smiling evenly. "What brings you here?"

As the two policemen crossed the linowalled studio, Yarbro nudged his partner with his metal elbow and nodded at the low white noryl shelving behind Randy's work area. Dolls and robot toys stood in neat rows, and a good dozen of the unboxed dolls were replicas of Blind Staggers.

"Been awhile, hasn't it?" said Gallo.

"Been most of my life." Randy placed his pen carefully back in a plaz jar filled with other drawing tools. "All of my life just about, since I really started a new one after they put this thing in my head." He touched his right temple. "I've kept up with your career, though. Like to know what happens to everyone I knew back before."

"It's your IMP we want to talk about." Gallo slowed, halted.

Randy smiled quietly, gestured at two glaz chairs close to his board. "Sit down" he invited. "I don't recognize your associate. Guess he didn't go to Middle School with us."

"This is Sgt. Yarbro." Gallo took the chair nearest Randy. "Okay, to business. We have reason to believe that when you visited the IMP clinic on the 13th, due to the quake, some of the robot staff was not functioning properly."

"It's just possible," added Yarbro, who was standing behind his chair with his metal fingers resting on its back, "they turned your gadget off by mistake."

Randy laughed and his eyes lost their dull cast. They suddenly glistened. "Of course they turned it off," he said. "And it was the most terrific thing that's ever happened to me.

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Doesn't take much to make a high point in my life, but this one sure was. For years I've tried to outwit the thing and get it to turn off, but as good as I am with gadgets, as you call them, Sergeant, I never had any —"

"Randy," cut in Gallo, "you realize you'll have to —"

"They stuck this thing in my head when I was not quite ten years old," Randy said. "I've had it in there ever since, and sometimes the pain's so bad ... but, listen, there's no pain now, and it's been tremendous. I can think anything, no matter how nasty or antisocial, and it's absolutely painless." He laughed again. "You can't imagine what that is like."

"Dangerous," said Yarbro. "Because of your criminal tendencies —"

"I never had any criminal tendencies, not back then anyway," Randy said. "What I had was feelings and notions that made me seem sort of odd to my more conforming contemporaries. I was a loner as a kid, lonely, had only one parent, and he was no help at all. So they decided I was a hostile and antisocial kid, ripe for an IMP. Might as well open the little guy's head and shove one in."

"If you've been doing what I think you have," said Gallo, "then there was no mistake made, and it's a damn shame the thing got turned off."

"After walking around with this thing for almost twenty years, I guess I am now what they thought I was then," he said. "That was Dr. Tomboura's final theory, you know. He'd decided that IMPs cause as much trouble as they cure. You should have heard that pious bastard when I called on him. He was very impressed at how I'd gimmicked his simple-minded security system and got close to him. He swore he'd made a mistake ever implanting a Box in me. Sure, I was just a nice, sensitive kid who wanted to draw and be grown-up quicker than some of the others at Middle School. It was all a mistake and he'd see what he could do —"

"You admit to having been with Dr. Tamboura just prior to his death?"

"I caused his death," said Randy, gesturing at the row of Blind Staggers toys. "With one of those. They make excellent clubs, don't arrouse suspicion. If someone spots you carrying one, they assume you're bringing it to some kid. We don't have children." He shifted in his chair. "I've had this IMP so long, I've worked out a few ways to outfox it. Most of us do that, I know a few others. So I've been able to have a few nasty notions and get only a small dose of pain. Pain I can, after a lot of practice, handle. The spasms and the fits, those nobody can take. But I taught myself to be able to have some private and worthwhile thoughts without going into any —"

"We better get us on in to headquarters," suggested Yarbro.

"Yeah, you have to come with us, Randy. Make a statement and —"

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"I can explain my reasons right now," he said, not moving. "Revenge was the main one. I've been able to make a list in my head, but I couldn't do anything about it. There's only so much pain you can deal with."

"But that's exactly what the IMP was designed for, to make —"

"Oh, I know," said Randy, smiling. "Anyway, let's talk about that beautiful January 13. When I realized I was free, my mind was my own again after all those years, I knew exactly what I had to do. I'd pay off everyone who did this to me and gave me the life I have."

"Kinda dumb," said Yarbro. "Musta knowned you'd be caught."

"I figured I would be eventually, yes," he said. "Still I've been able to take care of almost all the people on my list." Very calmly, he reached over and picked up a Blind Staggers doll.

Yarbro's metal hand swung up. "No funny stuff, buddy."

Gallo said, "I can understand Mrs. Hazzen, since she was the one who recommended you for the implantation originally. And Dr. Tamboura was the guy who actually did it. But why Pop Thornycroft?"

Randy placed the toy across his lap, rested his hands on it. "You really don't remember, do you?" he said, shaking his head and grinning. "You've been able to, without the aid of anything being stuck into your skull, forget it all. That's absolutely terrific, Brig." He tapped the fingers of his left hand on the toy's back. "Pop's restaurant was robbed when we were all about ten, something like twenty-two dollars was taken from a drawer. Pop, who never much liked me, accused me of the theft. I hadn't done it but that accusation was the final one Mrs. Hazzen needed. She sent me right over to Dr. Tamboura for testing."

"Christ, I hadn't thought about that burglary for years," said Gallo. "I don't think I knew that was what prompted her to.... That was a mistake because —"

"Because I didn't steal that money," said Randy. "You did."

Gallo looked away from him. "Well, actually, Randy, it was a couple of us," he admitted, voice low. "We broke in there early one morning, on the way to school, before he was open. You have to believe that was the only dishonest thing I ever did. Afterwards I felt rotten about it, thought about confessing. One of the reasons I didn't —"

"You didn't want an IMP in your skull," said Randy. "I always knew you were the one who'd really done it. I never told Mrs. Hazzen, though, because I was stupid enough to believe in the code kids have. Never squeal on anybody. Better to have them put a Box inside your head than do that."

"Randy, I never knew they did this to you because of what—"

"Why else do you think I put you on my list?"

"Me? That's absolutely —"

"You're the last one," said Randy,

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smiling. "After I kill you with this toy, I've got them all crossed off."

Now Gallo stared directly at him. "It isn't very likely," he said harshly. "I don't think you're that crazy, Randy. You might have been able to job the secsystems and sneak up on a few harmless old people. But there's no way in the world you'll get a chance to bash my head in with that thing."

Laughing gently, Randy said, "Oh, I know that." He flickered a small switch on the doll's side. "Which is why I rigged this one with explosives."

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Steven Utley returns with a short and chilling tale about a husband and wife who are prisoners of a hopeless marriage and of something else....

The Beasts of Love

BY

STEVEN UTLEY

He lay face up on his side of the bed and stared at the dark expanse of ceiling. The hall clock chimed the hour. Two o'clock, he thought, and all is...well...

The second and final chime faded. He found himself listening as the house talked to itself, cooed, softly murmured deep in its throat. Wood creaked and groaned, and somewhere far down in the house the thermostat clicked with a sound not so much actually heard as sensed. The house seemed to throb in time with the air-conditioner's rumblings. After an eternity, the rumblings ceased. The machinery settled down. He heard soft whirs and purrings and tried separating them, identifying them, willing each in its turn to stop and let him go back to sleep. He became aware of the gentle rustle of breath through nostrils.

Bitch, he thought.

There was a flutter of movement near his side.

Goddamn bitch.

The flutter stopped.

Thank you, bitch.

God, he hated her. He did not have to turn his eyes her way to see her. He had seen her on too many occasions, and it would be now as it had been always: the bitch would have kicked the light coverlet down about her calves, would have got her gown twisted up around her breasts, would be sprawled belly-up in the semidarkness with her legs bent and spread and looking for all the world like some monstrous pale frog at the point of the dissecting knife.

God, he hated her.

It was not just a matter of many minor annoyances and a number of major ones endured over the years. It had become, early on, much too early on, a matter of retaining them, of col-

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lecting them and categorizing them and nurturing each small seed of irritation, disappointment, resentment, until it flowered into disgust and loathing. Someday, he knew, or some night, something would finally snap, and he would erupt like Krakatau; she would turn into ice, and they would shatter the world as they destroyed each other.

It would come to that.

It could only come to that.

So why don't you get rid of her?

He blinked. He had not intended to think it as baldly as that. He repeated the question in his mind several times and experimented with it, shifting emphasis from the *why* to the *don't* and then to the *rid*. He tried revising the question: *So why don't you kick her out?*

The question revised itself: *So why don't you kick her off?*

Murder.

The word almost slipped out of his mouth.

Murder...

The sweet, the smooth, the velvet persuasiveness of the word.

But...*murder?*

But *freedom*. But no more listening to her as she sprawls there burbling and wheezing. No more watching her waddle about and wondering why, how, you could have married her of all people in the world. No more watching her eat and drink herself to the point of torpor. No more *her*, and no more *this*, but freedom and the chance to start all over again, to do it better next time, the way it should be done, to begin afresh...

His face itched with sweat. He wanted to laugh. He wanted to moan. Murder. Freedom. My God. Murder. He closed his eyes and sighed softly. The how of it. The when, the where. It had to be done right the first time, the only time. It couldn't be hurried. It had to look good. Murder. Freedom. So why.... He was vaguely amazed to find himself drifting off. So why don't.... He heard the hall clock chime the quarter-hour. So why don't you get rid of *her?*

Let us pause for a moment. Let us have a brief intermission and a word, as it were, from the sponsor. Let us get something straight.

I am in control here. I will set the stage and adjust the lighting and conduct the incidental music as I pull the strings and make the voices, perhaps a low growl for him, a sharp high squeak for her. We shall see. I will be in charge of the special effects. I will move the drama along, not according to the dictates of any script, but as I see fit from moment to moment. Scripts are for those who are afraid or unable to take chances with their leading characters; I choose spontaneity, improvisation, and who is to say that I am wrong to do so? Who presumes to tell me my craft? I will make the choices. I will direct thoughts and deeds. My puppets will suffer the consequences.

So. Consider. We have before us a

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man, a husband, and are shortly to have a woman, his wife. They have been married for eleven years. They are unable to explain why they are still together after all of those years, though the wife, who is actually the more sensitive if not the more articulate of the two, might, at my prompting, of course, shrug and say to someone whom she implicitly trusts, "Sheer inertia." There is, however, nobody whom she trusts; I have seen to that. There must be no relief for either of them, no relief of any kind until I will it. We have, then, a hugely unsuccessful marriage of two people who have gone (or, rather, because I *am* in control here, have been taken) from loving each other to what would seem to be the point of loving hating each other. I know what I am about.

The alarm clock rattled tinnily on the nightstand. With a groan, she rolled onto her belly and buried her face in the pillow. Mattress springs protested. The clock kept ringing. She muttered an obscenity into the pillow, pushed herself up on one elbow, and with her free hand turned off the alarm. She looked around at the man beside her. A smear of drool glistened at the corner of his mouth.

Yuck, she thought.

She got up and padded into the bathroom and relieved herself. The door of the medicine cabinet above the basin had once again swung open of its own accord. She scanned the untidy rows of prescription bottles and aerosol cans of shaving cream, deodorant, hair remover. The aspirin. The vitamin capsules. The sleeping tablets. The tranquilizers. The diet pills. The pep pills. Jesus, what a clutter.

She flushed the commode and washed her hands. As she brushed her teeth, she took one of the small brown prescription bottles from the cabinet, weighed it in her palm, gave it a gentle shake. It sounded half full. She thoughtfully replaced the bottle, rinsed her mouth, and paused for a moment, listening, before stepping into the shower. Now he's snoring, she thought in revulsion. Jesus. Shake the house down, bastard. *Jesus*, listen to him!

She showered. She dried herself. She sprayed her armpits with deodorant. She took the same brown bottle from the medicine cabinet, twisted off the safety cap, poured the contents into the palm of her hand. Counted them. Returned them to the bottle and the bottle to the cabinet. Thought, Oh God. Oh *God*. You can't know what it's like. You can't know how it *is* with him. You just can't know.

Oh, but I can, I do, I know all about it.

Listen: think of me as a spider sitting in one strategic corner of a vast, yet fine web which covers the entire city. So fine is this web that no one can move or speak or even think without

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the vibrations thereof being instantly transmitted to me. And, like a spider, I am discriminating. A leaf caught in my web will not rouse me. But let something with juice in it come my way, and I will suck it dry and...ah, well, you get the idea; it will hardly do to press too hard on my little puppeteer-cum-spider metaphor. I might just as well speak of driving dumb beasts before me.

What matters is that I know all about it. All about all of it. Nothing escapes my attention. I absorb everything, and I know, for instance, that everybody (and I do not mean to exclude myself, in *this* respect, at least, I am just like everyone else) is hungry for something. Power, immortality, love. Revenge. A combination, sometimes, of all four and more besides. I spread my web over the city, and back to me come all the great and small hungers, and all the knowledge of the various and sundry ways in which attempts are made to appease those appetites. There is the bottle, and the needle, and violence. There is sex. There are the selfish acts and the selfless ones. There is applause. There is death. In my case, there is the peerless ability to influence the thoughts and actions of two particular people whom I have methodically and with considerable cunning and precision manipulated into an earthly hell.

Fair is fair. I must be attended day and night, which is, after all, why I have been consigned to this place. Another earthly hell. I cannot feed myself: my fingers have one joint apiece and are webbed besides; my thumbs are stubs, mere hard bumps protruding from the sides of what pass for my hands. I cannot move myself: my legs are badly mismatched; my feet are only boneless swellings, with an odd number of randomly placed nails in the general area where toes ought to be, at the bottoms of what pass for my calves; I have no ankles. Nor do I have much control over my stomach, my salivary glands, my bladder and bowels. My body is squashed-looking, shoulderless, chestless, all gut and buttocks. My head is equipped with the correct number of sensory organs, but they are erratically positioned, and only half of them function. I cannot talk. I cannot hear, though, with my web, I miss nothing. It has been thought of me that I belong with the other gargoyles atop Notre Dame cathedral. It has been thought of me that I should have died the moment I entered the world. I will never know the love of another human being.

But.

They did not speak to each other at the breakfast table. They avoided eye contact. He did not give her even the usual perfunctory kiss when he left the house. She made herself another cup of coffee and sipped it slowly and thought about the brown bottle in the medicine cabinet. Abruptly, she began to cry.

At noon, he passed up lunch to

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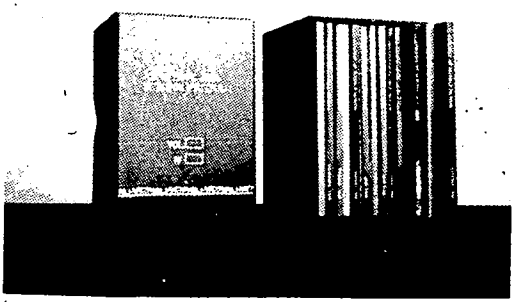
drink instead. He imagined his wife lying broken and still at the bottom of the basement steps. He imagined himself standing at the top of the steps, looking down at her. He put his face into his hands and said, "Oh, my God," and trembled violently.

But I am in control.

So I draw them back from the brink of the abyss, not so far, of course, that they will not suffer great anguish for having gone so far as to actually, seriously contemplate murdering each other, but far enough so that they will attempt, once again, to regain that which I long ago took from them. The love. The real and shining and glorious love. The love that made me. The love that was to have sustained them when they saw how poorly they had made me. The love that they could not extend to me and that has been no match at all for what I have here inside my grotesque nine-year-old head.

And now Mommy and Daddy are at home again. And now they *try* to kiss and make up.



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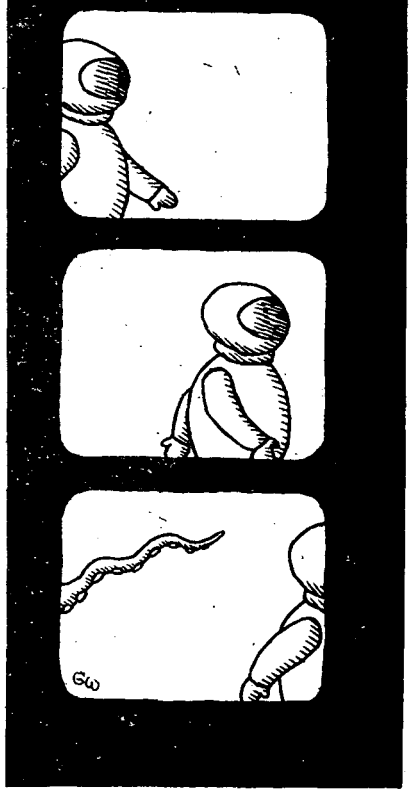
Films

BAIRD SEARLES



XANADON'T OR TERPSICHORE ON ROLLER SKATES

One of that whimsical bunch of films from the 1940s that was all that was available as fantasy in those days was a movie that recounted the adventures of the Muse Terpsichore when she decended to Earth to revamp a Broadway show that was about the Muses, and which she considered libelous. Given the Philistine views of the time, what she ended up with was a show portrayed as pretentiously artsy, and she only became human when she learned to boogie.

It's a mildly amusing movie musical, and its major asset was Rita Hayworth, who was indeed a Goddess, no matter what one thought of her talents (if any.)

We now have a contemporary movie musical (if that's not a contradiction in terms) about Terpsichore descending. The lady impersonating the goddess this time is Olivia Newton-John (or is it Newton-Fig?) (cheap shot, Searles) who is about as determinedly Terrestrial as any female I've ever seen. No girl-next-door ever looked more girl-next-dorable, and she can sing a little, dance a little, act hardly at all, and is not so hot on roller skates, either, which is where she spends most of her time in this movie.

On this particular slumming trip, Terpsichore gets involved with a young artist and an old musician who

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combine forces to open a super disco named *Xanadu*, which is also the name of the movie (*pace*, Mr. Coleridge, and, boy, could this film have used a person from Porlock!).

Hollywood musicals, of course, were famous for their banal plots and dialogue, with some memorable exceptions; the talent was used almost exclusively for the musical numbers. Here the plot and dialogue are of such excruciating triteness as to make the older examples seem penned by Shaw; there is endless blather about making your dreams come true and other such momentous messages.

As for the musical numbers, the choreographers (there were two) for the most part seem to think (despite the numerous references to well-remembered classics from the 1940s, which indicate that they had seen some Berkley and Donen) that ten minutes of frenetic activity are all that's needed for a production number.

I will concede several exceptions. There is one animated number which must have had the germ of a good idea. It is done exactly in the Disney style; unfortunately this conceit is carried no further, and what we end up with is a Disney cartoon, cuteness and all.

One of the frenetic live numbers has a sort of point; it's dream sequence in which a big band from the '40s, with all the appurtenances (a Miranda-type singer, a female trio, etc.) has a sort of play-off against a contemporary punk rock band with all *its* electronic gear and disco dancers. At the end, the two groups join together; even the band platforms slide into each other to meld the ensembles into one big production finale, not uneffectively.

However, the one sequence that almost makes the whole dreary business worthwhile is also pertinent to the fantasy element therein. It comes at the very beginning of the movie (therefore raising one's hopes unduly, alas) and is essentially the entrance of the nine Muses.

They are seen on a very stylized billboard painting; one by one they come alive, haloed by brilliant auras, and take off—literally—over Los Angeles (never did any city more need Muses), which is depicted in almost still cityscapes topped by speeded-up, boiling clouds. It's one of those inspired visual effects almost uncommunicable in words and might just be worth the price of admission.

Aside from that, the only other moment of visual fantasy happens when the hero (who with Miss Newton-John seems to have many more teeth than is normal) jumps through the billboard after Terpsichore. I was hoping for a through-the-mirror type mythical world, but Helikon (or Parnassus or Olympus, depending on whom you read) seems to be nothing but a large black space floored with neon tubing and roofed with extremely phony-looking stars, where Zeus and Hera bicker a lot as disembodied voices.

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The only other thing worth mentioning in *Xanadu* is Gene Kelly, who plays the aging musician. He is one of my personal pantheon of greats (the everlasting battle in my circle is the unsolvable Astaire/Kelly comparison), and here he shows up the young people in the matter of delivering a song, a dance, a line. But even Kelly the Great seems subdued in the face of all this non-material, though the grin is as infectious as ever, and I would guess the lack of energy is less from age than from a lack of anything to work with.

A final note for trivia collectors. The name of Kelly's character in *Xanadu* is Danny McGuire. He did *not* play opposite Hayworth in *Down to Earth*, which was her Terpsichore vehicle (the hero was the eminently forgettable Larry Parks). But in the one film he did make with Hayworth, the renowned *Cover Girl*, his character's name was, indeed, Danny McGuire. How's that for obscurantism?

Coming soon

Next month: "The Oracle and the Mountains," the third tale of Roland the last gunslinger, by STEPHEN KING. Plus "Menage Outre," a new Aventine story by LEE KILLOUGH, brand-new stories by CHARLES SHEFFIELD, KEITH ROBERTS and many others.

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The Aliens were sickly immigrants, confined to "Rosfo Towns," and their thinking process was so different that communication with them was nearly impossible....

Rosfo Gate

BY
COLEMAN BRAX

Louie was swinging a horse chestnut from a knotted tether as he crossed the street. This chestnut had done well for him today; it had smashed, in successive triumphs, the chestnuts swung by three of his classmates. It was a "six-killer" now, the best chestnut that he had found this season.

But as Louie reached the leaf-strewn sidewalk, his thoughts turned from chestnuts. He was approaching a gate of Rosfo Town, a gate he now passed every day on his way home from school. In previous years, he had preferred a shorter route. It was only since returning to school this fall that Louis had been going out of his way to pass the gate.

Perhaps it was because of the TV show he had seen about the Rosfos. It was during the August heat wave, he recalled, when he'd come down with an unexpected cold. His mother had taken his younger brother to the pool, while Louie had remained home alone. The programs he'd watched that day were ones his mother might not have approved of.

Especially the one about the Rosfos. "The Rosfos will get you if you don't behave," his mother had often told him. That was supposed to scare him. It scared little Joey, but Louie was eleven now. He knew the Rosfos were ugly, but he wasn't sure that they would really hurt people.

After all, they were supposed to be sick. So sick that they had to come to another planet to live. On Earth, they got better, but never completely well. Louie wondered whether they would even have the strength to do the things that people said they did.

The man on the TV show had said that Rosfos have no jaws. If they had no jaws, then how could they eat peo-

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ple, Louie had wondered. The rumors didn't make sense. He had put the question to his friends. "Ever hear of a meat grinder?" one had retorted. That remark had left Louie's eyes stinging but his mind unconvinced.

So it was that Louie found himself changing his route home from school. He would stop at the gate every time and stare in at their building. Usually, the gate would be open and he would muster the courage to put one foot inside Rosfo Town. There was never anybody to tell him no.

He occasionally would see Rosfos in the distance, but none close to the gate. He had seen close-up pictures of them, however. Their skins were greenish-brown like old copper. Their heads had the shape of a wrinkled upside-down pear. Their eyes were clear disks, deeply set. The Rosfos were ugly, but they were not *that* ugly. People should, he thought, be able to get along with them.

But there was something different about them, the TV announcer had said. Louie was familiar with some of what the man had talked about. He'd studied some set theory and Boolean algebra and symbolic logic. But the man said that the aliens didn't think the way people did. Only a few highly trained experts were capable of making any kind of communication. It had taken years to negotiate for the establishment of the Rosfo Towns.

This was the part of the program that had most intrigued Louie: the scene in which the Rosfo and the man were shown "talking." They had a big panel of lights behind them and, in addition to sounds and gestures, they created patterns on the lights for each other. Louie wondered how many years of schooling it would take to be able to accomplish what that man was doing.

It was a question he had not dared ask his parents or his teachers. They feared the Rosfos, he knew. Feared them and distrusted them. Only when they talked about how the Rosfos' metal shipments from home kept their taxes low did they show any happiness over the Rosfos' presence.

Louie pondered these matters as he stood at the open gate. It would be easy to walk in now. Inside, Rosfo Town looked just like the city outside. There was a row of low brick apartment houses like the one in which Louie lived. Their sidewalks were shaded by the same types of trees found in the rest of the city. Maples. Maples with an occasional horse chestnut. The leaves on their trees were bright red; he could see no leaves on their streets.

Louie tried to imagine that the gate wasn't there, that he was looking down an ordinary street. For a few moments, he almost believed it. He started to walk down the friendly, familiar sidewalk. He walked a full block inside the gate. Then he saw something that chilled his legs. There were chalk marks on the sidewalk, but in a pattern that was

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utterly strange. The design was made up of short lines that never crossed or touched each other. There was no sense to it; it was as if parts of the drawing were missing.

Louie found himself trembling. He looked up at the windows of the buildings, expecting to see a hundred alien faces staring at him. He saw nothing in the windows but the reflections of other buildings. Then he heard a sound behind him; in a sweat, he turned.

Louie's mouth fell open. The Rosfo standing there was *small*, about Louie's height. Its double-kneed legs were shorter and fatter than the legs on the Rosfos in the photographs. It wore a different type of costume also — a shiny blue outfit that covered the torso only. The Rosfo carried a piece of chalk at the end of the snakelike arm that grew out of the center of its chest. Was it possible that this was a Rosfo *child?*

Louie's heart was battering his chest, but he stood his ground. If this was a child, he thought, then maybe it would know how to play games. He lifted the hand that still held the chestnut and swung the tethered nut like a pendulum. Then he held it out to the Rosfo.

The Rosfo approached cautiously. The arm tucked the chalk into its garment, then reached for the tether. Louie could see the tiny mass of fingers very clearly as the arm took the prized chestnut from him and pulled it close to its eyes. "Chestnut," Louie said. "Chestnut. Chestnut." Then he went through a pantomime showing how one combatant suspends his chestnut while the other swings his nut at the stationary target.

The alien did not respond to the pantomime. Its mouth moved, however. It began to make sounds. On the third try, it made a sound that Louie recognized.

"Yes," he shouted with excitement. "Chestnut."

"Shassmmut," said the Rosfo. Then it put the "six-killer" inside its garment and darted into a building.

"Hey, come back," Louie shouted. He turned around nervously, but there were no other aliens in sight. "That's mine," he shouted. He walked closer to the dark green door that the Rosfo had entered, but didn't dare follow it. He just stood there awhile, wondering what he could possibly do to recover his venerable warrior.

Suddenly the door opened and the Rosfo came out. This was the same one, Louie felt certain, though he could not say why. The Rosfo sat down on the sidewalk at the edge of the chalked design and began to pull objects out of pouches in its clothing. It removed six colored balls the size of large marbles and placed them between the markings. Then it began to chatter over the balls.

After a while, Louie realized that the alien was repeating a series of sounds over and over. The name of the objects or game or whatever the alien

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was referring to seemed beyond Louie's vocal powers. Finally he took a deep breath, pressed his lips together, and made an impolite explosive noise that his mother forbade. This he followed by a series of three coughs. The alien repeated its sounds with new emphasis and showed a widening of its lipless mouth. Louie hoped that that meant that he was getting the word right.

Then the alien turned its attention back to the balls. Louie watched it for several minutes as it chattered with increasing intensity. Louie could almost believe that he was hearing the excitement of a marbles player, but he could not imagine what the excitement was about. The balls remained where they had been placed. There was no action in this game, no action at all. Louie could not understand that.

When Louie got home that day he did not have his chestnut. He did have a red ball about the size of a chestnut. The Rosfo had given it to him from its game. Louie didn't know what to do with it. Even if he could punch a hole through it, it clearly wouldn't pass as a chestnut. And it didn't look much like a marble, despite its round shape. It wasn't shiny at all; its surface was slightly rough.

After dinner, Louie slipped outside and walked to a dark street corner. He looked up and spotted a few stars. In his pocket was the ball, an object that came from somewhere out there. Louie wondered if, right at that moment, he might be looking in the direction of the Rosfos' home. Nobody knew where the Rosfos were from or what their world was like or even how their starships were powered. Nobody knew much at all about the Rosfos.

Louie didn't show anyone the red ball. He slept with it under his pillow that night and took it to school in his pocket the next morning. That day, he found it difficult to pay attention to the teacher. His gaze kept drifting across the room to the red and yellow leaves on the trees outside the window. When the teacher asked him for the derivative of a raised to the power x, he made the obvious mistake of giving the derivative of x raised to the power a. Someone in the back row snickered and Louie slumped down in his seat. He couldn't get his mind off Rosfo Town.

On the playground he avoided the chestnut duelers. But Johnny Wheeler, bent on revenge for the previous day's defeat, caught up with Louie on the top bars of the jungle gym.

"What's the matter, Louie? Chicken?" Johnny pulled out a tough-looking fighter on a battered cord and shoved it in Louie's face. "I got a ten-killer here. Think you can beat it?"

Louie looked away from Johnny and out over the playground. From the height of the jungle gym, he could see all of his classmates at play. They were engaged in games he understood: hopscotch, football, jump rope. He won-

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dered what they would make of the alien's game.

"You chicken, Louie? Where's that dumb six-killer of yours?" Johnny insisted.

"Lost it," said Louie quickly. Then he started to climb down the outermost bars.

"Lost it, bull!" said Johnny. "You just don't have any guts." He stepped on one of Louie's fingers as Louie dropped below him.

Louie didn't cry out despite the intense pain. He got down to the ground and waited for Johnny. Johnny had a mouth, but Louie knew he wasn't much of a fighter. Louie could lick him easily, and Johnny deserved it. But at the last moment, Louie turned away and left Johnny unmolested. The penalty for fighting on the playground was staying after school, a punishment that Louie didn't want to risk.

When the teacher dismissed the class, Louie was first out of his seat and first to the door. He ran all the way to the Rosfo gate. Then he stopped for a moment as the old fears hit him. The street inside looked the same as before, but it took a bit of courage to walk down it again.

No Rosfos were in sight. Louie walked until he came to what he thought was the door that the small Rosfo had used. He waited for a few minutes, but nobody appeared. Then he tried to repeat the sounds he had learned: *pfvvvtt ach ach ach.* He did that several times, as loud as he could. Then the door opened and his "friend" stepped out. He was certain that he recognized the wrinkly pear-head with its lipless mouth.

The Rosfo carried a small sack made from the same blue material as its clothing. It walked to a part of the sidewalk that had not been marked and sat down. Louie reached into his pockets and pulled out several objects he had collected: a pencil, a stone, a salted cracker, a rubber band. He sat down in front of the alien and put the objects between them.

The Rosfo put its sack to the side and directed its attention to Louie's objects. It picked each up in turn and felt it carefully with its cluster of tiny fingers. As it lifted each object, Louie named it. But the alien did not attempt to repeat the names.

When the alien was finished with its examination, Louie again tried naming the objects. Again, he picked up each in turn and repeated the sound several times. But the alien did not respond. Finally, it picked up the objects one by one and put them to the side. Then it reached for its sack.

The Rosfo brought out a dozen objects. Some appeared to be chestnuts in various conditions. One was apparently the chestnut that Louie had given up. Another had a hole but no tether. There were balls of chestnut size and there were small objects of irregular shape.

Louie picked up one of the chestnuts that didn't look quite right. When

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he squeezed it between his fingers, the insides felt like foam rubber.

The alien began to arrange the objects into a pattern. Louie's chestnut was placed first. Then, with this as center, the other objects were positioned at various points around an imaginary set of concentric circles. Finally, the rubber band, stone, and cracker were added to the pattern.

Then the Rosfo picked up the pencil and dropped it in Louie's lap. It motioned with its arm towards the other objects. Louie was certain that he was expected to place the pencil in the pattern, but he had no idea where to put it.

When he hesitated, the Rosfo began to chatter. It seemed to be saying "chestnut" once in a while, interspersed with sounds that meant nothing to Louie. It waved its arm over the objects as it spoke.

Louie decided he would have to do *something*, so he dropped the pencil near the edge of the design. That got the Rosfo excited. It picked up the pencil and examined it again, as if seeking new properties it had overlooked. Then it put it back, but not in the place where Louie had dropped it.

Louie just stared at the new pattern. He remembered what the TV announcer had said about the aliens. Their thought patterns were different from ours. And their senses were different also. Perhaps it was hopeless to try to befriend this Rosfo.

No matter how hard Louie thought, he couldn't penetrate the secret of the pattern. He remembered the time he had tried to learn a complicated card game from some older boys. In the end, he had become so frustrated that he had simply tossed the cards away. Now he wanted to kick the objects into the street so he wouldn't have to look at them any more.

"I don't understand," Louie cried aloud. "I don't understand." He waved his arms over the whole collection. Then he put his head down on his raised knee and closed his eyes for a minute.

When he opened them, the Rosfo was still chattering over his pattern. Louie stood up and considered going home. He thought, for a moment, about the highly trained experts with their panels of lights. He would have to go to junior high school and then to high school and then to college and then to graduate school and then ... *maybe* he would know enough to communicate with the aliens.

Maybe. Maybe not. It would be a long time....

Louie bent down and took the central chestnut and three other objects and moved them to another part of the sidewalk. He put down the chestnut in a new center and held out the other three objects to the Rosfo. Perhaps by starting with a smaller set, he hoped, he could catch on to the alien's thoughts.

The Rosfo picked up a metal chestnut, then came over and sat down next

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to Louie. It took the rubber band from Louie and put it aside. Then it placed the remaining objects so that they fell along a straight line. "Shassmutt," it said, pointing to the original chestnut, which lay at one end of the line. "Ech-shassmutt," it said, pointing to the chestnut with a hole but no tether, which was next. "Oofsh-shassmut," it said, pointing to the imitation metal chestnut, which was last on the line.

Louie, encouraged now, tried reversing the positions of the last two objects. The Rosfo clucked several times and returned them to their original places. It was evident that the order was important. Louie began to suspect that the position given an object was determined by its similarity to the first chestnut.

But why had the Rosfo placed the foam chestnut closer than the metal replica? He picked up the foam-filled bag again. The weight was about right and the color was right, but the feel was wrong. The metal chestnut also had the right color, but it was far too heavy and the feel was also wrong — too hard and too cold. So the metal chestnut differed in more ways from the original than did the foam chestnut. Fine. So far, the pattern made sense.

Now the Rosfo handed him a stone. If his understanding was correct, Louie thought, then this should be easy to place. Color, weight, and feel were all different from the original chestnut. So he'd put it on the line beyond the metal chestnut. But as his hand moved to the end of the line, he heard a clucking that he took for disapproval. The alien nudged his hand away with a flick of its arm.

Of course. Louie smiled. The stone was not chestnut-like at all. It could not be mistaken for a chestnut even at a distance. So it had to have its own line from the center of the circle.

Louie moved his hand out of line with the other objects. The alien urged him on with short coughs. Yes, thought Louie, out of line but at what angle? The stone was different, but reasonably similar. A small angle seemed right.

He dropped the stone about thirty degrees clockwise from the metal chestnut. The Rosfo reached its arm over and repositioned the stone slightly. *Only slightly!*

"Shtoon," it said. "Rrrkst-fzztk-shassmut." Louie clapped his hands with joy.

From that success, they progressed rapidly. Within an hour, Louie learned a dozen of the Rosfo's prefixes. By then, he also understood the positions of all but three of the objects. These three were troublesome. There were two brown balls that looked identical, but which the Rosfo wanted far apart. Here was clearly a case of the alien sensing something that Louie couldn't detect. After a prolonged dialogue, the Rosfo put away the confusing ball.

Then there was the problem of the metal chestnuts of slightly different

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shades of brown. In this case, Louie suspected that it was he who had the finer powers of discrimination and the alien who was slightly color-blind. The Rosfo wanted them together; Louie wanted them separated.

In the end, the Rosfo accepted Louie's judgment. It seemed to Louie that it was making an effort to be a good sport.

And so they continued until Louie noticed that shadows had darkened the entire street. He had been so enthralled that he'd paid no attention to the fact that he was late. In fact, he was *very* late. His mother would want to know what he'd been doing.

"Good-by," he said, springing to his feet. It occurred to him that he and the alien hadn't yet exchanged names. But he suspected that names to the alien were not what they were to him. If today's game was any indication, the alien's name would contain a series of prefixes that compared it to other members of its species. It would take some time to learn.

"Goosh-bay," said the Rosfo.

Louie wondered if it understood what that meant. "I'll be back," he said. And he knew he would be back. There were so many questions he wanted to ask his friend.

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Barbara Paul has written several highly regarded mystery novels (most recently LIARS AND TYRANTS, Doubleday) and science fiction novels (EXERCISE FOR MADMEN, Berkley; BIBBLINGS, New American Library). Her first story for F&SF is a fresh and amusing tale about how Harriet tried to tidy up her racial unconscious.

The Seven Deadly Sessions

BY

BARBARA PAUL

Prologue:

If you can remember the artificial word PEWSAGL," the H.P. said to me, "you'll be all right. PEWSAGL. It's an acronym, of course. Made up of the first letters of the words that define those nasty little pockets of religio-psychic disturbances that keep us from being well-integrated human beings. Pride, Envy, Wrath, Sloth, Avarice, Gluttony, Lechery. And that's the order in which we'll go after them."

"PEWSAGL," I repeated obediently.

"Very good. We'll take one a day, like vitamins, and at the end of a week we'll have them all exorcised. On the eighth day we rest."

"PEWSAGL," I said again.

"That's right, fix it in your memory. Your conscious memory, that is. After all, it's your racial *un*-conscious we're concerned with here. Once that's all tidied up, you'll no longer have to go around wondering who you are."

"But," I said, puzzled, "I don't go around wondering who I am."

"Now, now, Harriet," the H.P. admonished. "We mustn't be self-deceived. Of course you do." He paused dramatically. "'Who am I?' If you don't bore someone with that question at least once a month, you have no business claiming membership in the twentieth century. You *do* want to be a Jungian Fellow, don't you?"

"Oh, yes," I said eagerly. Being named a Jungian Fellow was a great honor. It also provided a hefty federal grant, renewable annually. It was the government's way of rewarding mental health.

"The Jungian Fellowship is our only hope, you understand," the H.P. went

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on. (H.P.) stood for both High Priest and Head Psychiatrist. In spite of the redundancy of the latter phrase, the position ranked in the top echelon of the Jungian hierarchy.) "Since the identity crisis outbreak grew to pandemic proportions," he said, "we've had to take drastic steps. So many people who can't be helped—poor dears! Look at all the Existential Rest Homes we've had to build for those who tried to create their own identities and failed. And think of those poor souls who were given the Freudian adjustment treatment—tragic, tragic!"

This was true. The world was overrun with people who walked around saying "I'm glad I'm paranoid" and writing fiction for five cents a word.

"No," the H.P. was saying, "the Jungian probe is our only solution. We must realize that we *all* went bonkers somewhere back along the evolutionary chain. We have to dig out those primal fears and squash them flat. Those qualities in ourselves that we fear the most—murderous anger and lust and all the rest of it—we can't allow them to paralyze us any longer. Well, Harriet, tomorrow we start with Pride. Eight a.m. sharp, don't be late."

"PEWSAGL," I said.

The First Session:

I was standing on the bank of a river in a steaming jungle with several vaguely anthropoid types, thinking we all needed a shave. Then I realized we were watching a young boy drown.

My own evolutionary regression had been a bit of a shock, in spite of the H.P.'s careful preparations. But I pulled myself together and headed for the river.

"Not so fast!" said the H.P.'s voice in my head. "Are you sure you want to save him? The river god has claimed the boy for his own."

"You've got to be kidding," I answered.

"Not at all. Even in this primitive time, pre-man's pea brain deifies what it fears and fails to understand. Those creatures around you there know nothing about swimming. The order of things at that time requires the boy to die. Do you have the right to interfere with the universal order of things?"

"Damned right I do," I said and plunged into the river.

By the time I got the boy to the river bank, he'd stopped moving—I was afraid I was too late. I checked to make sure his tongue wasn't blocking his windpipe. Then I pinched his nostrils together and started blowing rhythmically into his mouth. It wasn't long before he started gagging and coughing. I heard another sound, the sound—and smell—of fear.

I looked up to see the other creatures backing away from me, their eyes large and frightened. They stopped at a respectful distance, moaning to themselves but never taking their eyes off me.

"See what's happened?" came the

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H.P.'s voice. "In their own dim-witted way, they've figured out you're different from them. You stopped death. Ergo, you aren't subject to the same restrictions they are."

"So I'm a god?"

"As close to it as they can understand 'god.' But you and I know better. All you've done is flaunt the limits placed on life—you know things no one has any right to know at that time and in that place. You've overstepped yourself."

"Hubris?"

"And how. The Greeks considered any presumption beyond one's natural rights an act of sinful pride. And Adam and Eve got kicked out of the Garden because they aspired to be 'as the gods.' Genesis three, five, I just happen to know. But it's easy to understand, isn't it? Look at those creatures around you, Harriet. They're more animal than human. They're less than animal—even animals know how to swim. It's difficult *not* to feel you're better than they are, isn't it? They let their own offspring die because they're afraid of water. Despicable!" A change of tone: "How do you feel?"

"Worried."

"Oh?" The H.P. sounded pleased. "About what?"

"Communication. How can I make these creatures understand about mouth-to-mouth resuscitation when we can't talk to each other?"

Suddenly I was back in the H.P.'s laboratory, and the H.P. himself was removing the electrodes from my scalp. "We may have to repeat this session, Harriet, with a different setting and situation. I'm not altogether satisfied with today's results. But for now, we'll stay with the original schedule. Tomorrow, Envy."

The Second Session:

The Cro-Magnon man stood in the mouth of his cave sneering down at us. We Neanderthal had invaded his home while he was away hunting. I had been watching my companions as they wonderingly handled the tools and weapons that were sophisticated beyond anything they had seen before.

"Look at Cro-Magnon," commanded the H.P.

I looked at him. He was magnificent.

"Now look at your 'mate.'"

I looked at the shaggy, moth-eaten creature beside me. He too was staring at the first true man, and was whimpering with fear. I reached out and patted his shoulder.

"That glorious creature in the cave entrance is what you could have been," the H.P. said. "Instead, you are what you are—subhuman. Look, he's not even trying to conceal his contempt for you. That's hardly fair, is it? Don't you resent Cro-Magnon?"

"Oh, I don't know," I said. "I think he's kind of sexy."

"That's the *seventh* session," the H.P. said sharply. "Stick to the schedule."

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I walked over to Cro-Magnon and gave him my best Neanderthal smile. He looked startled, then gestured with his arm. Immediately he was joined by several others of his species; one was a woman who was clearly his mate.

"There!" said the H.P. triumphantly. "He's rejected you for one of his own kind. How do you feel now?"

"Cold," I said. "Did you have to pick such a drafty cave?"

"Somehow this isn't going as it should," said the H.P. as he unplugged me. "I think we'll have to regress you even further. Tomorrow is the Day of Wrath. We'll put you in a situation in which your anger will be your only defense against extinction. Then we'll see."

The Third Session:

Hunger.

Pad, pad, pad. Paws sore. Eyes runny. Breath short.

Hunger.

Odor: meat! Putrefying. But *meat.*

Sniff. This way. Over this rise. A gully. Down. Paws bleeding.

Hunger.

There! A dead thing. A dead *meat* thing.

Aaahhhh. Good. Good.

Blackout. Nothing. Then pain—sharp pain. Fuzz-ness. Pain. Dim sight.

Another One. one like me. Eating my meat.

Pain. Dizziness. The other One watching me. As it feeds.

Move toward meat. The One lifts its head, snarls.

Not enough for both.

My food. Stole *my* food. The One feeds, I starve. Stole from me.

Hunger.

Look at the One. Protruding ribs. Blood on side. One eye gone. Hind leg broken. Desperate.

Pad away. Look elsewhere.

"Now why in blue blazes did you do that?" the H.P. exploded.

"Because that other one was in far worse shape than I was," I said.

"What difference does that make?" the H.P. bellowed. "It was him or you!"

"Not necessarily," I replied in what I hoped was a self-assured tone. "I was on my way to look for something else to eat when you yanked me back here. I couldn't attack that poor, half-dead creature—even if he did steal from me."

"But that could have been all the food you'd have for a week! And it was *yours*—you found it fair and square! That meat was probably the difference between life and death—and you just walked away! Didn't you feel angry toward the thief?"

"Aw, no. I felt sorry for him."

"*Sorry* for him! Starving animals don't feel compassion! You were supposed to feel *anger!*"

I mumbled an apology.

The H.P. let loose a stream of language that would have made the proverbial sailor blush. Not being a pro-

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verbial sailor, I just watched, fascinated, as the H.P. went through a series of isometric breathing exercises that eventually calmed him down.

"Sorry, Harriet, I lost control there for a minute, heh heh heh. Now listen to me. You're going about this all wrong. You're merely *acting out* simulated situations instead of immersing yourself totally in your archetypal personas. This is no behavioristic game-playing we're indulging in—oh, no! You understand that?"

I nodded.

"I realize it's not completely your fault, Harriet. Your psychiatric profile indicates you have a very low empathy quotient, but it's still in the workable range. You simply must stop thinking like Harriet and give yourself wholly to your archetype. Only then will we be able to purge you of your inherited contaminations."

"I'll try."

"Good. Now tomorrow we go after Sloth. What we're going to do is regress you all the way—and I mean *all* the way. We'll take you back to some state of primordial ooze where Harrietness is simply not possible. I won't be in mind contact with you, because you won't *have* a mind."

I tried to look brave.

"You won't be able to impose your modern notions on a primitive condition this time, because those notions will remain here when you go back. Think of it, Harriet—a purely mindless condition! No opinions, no decisions, nothing intellectual at all. Just pure instinct. *Yield* to sloth, Harriet, and get it out of your system forever."

"Primordial ooze, you say."

"That's right—primordial ooze."

The Fourth Session:

"Well?" asked the H.P. "How was it?"

"I really couldn't say," I yawned.

The Fifth Session:

"I think we'll mark yesterday's session a tentative success," the H.P. said. "Of course, some of my colleagues will claim that without mind contact nothing can be proved about what happened. But I consider the fact that you remember nothing of your regression a sign that—finally! —you may have given yourself totally to your situation. Notice I said *may* have. There's room for doubt."

I agreed.

"We have a surprise for you today, Harriet. Born of necessity, I might add. Since we've already regressed you as far as possible in the earthly chain, today we're going to place you in an other-worldly situation."

"Ghosts?"

"Good heavens, no. The world of your imagination, Harriet. Childhood dreams, pre-puberty fantasies, things like that. We'll draw on your most private thoughts to create a world with which you will identify easily. And completely."

"Well, now, I don't know—"

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"Don't worry, the only thing we're concerned with today is Avarice. Everyone's a little bit greedy. What we want you to do is let yourself be guided entirely by a desire to be rich. In a child's imaginative world, obstacles are easily overcome, and life-goals are achieved merely by wishing for them. That's the world in which you can be as acquisitive as you like—there's nothing to stop you but the limits of your own imagination. Explore the playground of your childhood fantasies. And remember, your only goal is the acquisition of wealth. Go!"

I stood on the bridge of my ship, the skull and cross-bones flying overhead.

"Thar she blows!" called a voice from the crow's-nest. Off the port side a Spanish galleon lay against the horizon.

"'Thar she blows,'" said the H.P. peevishly, "is what you say when a *whale* is sighted."

"This is *my* childhood fantasy," I reminded him.

"Oh, all right, all right."

"Hard to port!" I called. Faster than a speeding bullet we raced toward the galleon—*oh-oh!* Galleons, plural. Where before there had been one, eight Spanish galleons now maneuvered into position.

I reached into the pocket of my Harpo Marx coat and pulled out Aladdin's lamp. I rubbed it vigorously and the genie yaroomed upward in a cloud of green smoke and flame that set fire to the mainsail.

"Your wish, mistress?"

"First of all, douse that fire. And then bring the rest of my fleet. Don't dawdle."

He was a poky genie. By the time he'd extinguished the fire, the galleons had completely surrounded us.

"Where's my fleet?" I demanded.

"Out there, mistress," the genie gestured.

'Out there' was a circle of my ships. Inside the circle was the smaller circle of the Spanish ships. Inside *that* circle was my ship, dead center. Nobody seemed to know what to do.

"I think I want out of this," I told the genie.

The planking of the poop deck slid back. An automatic platform lifted my Buck Rogers spaceship from the bowels of the ship up to deck level.

"*What* is going on?" the H.P. complained.

"Sorry," I said. "I always had a tendency to overplot."

I zoomed away in my spaceship, leaving the genie to negotiate a peace treaty between the warring parties.

"Now what?" the H.P. asked.

"Now we go in search of the philosopher's stone. The stone that turns base metal into gold—that should bring out my avaricious streak, don't you think?"

"I suppose so," said the H.P. hesitantly. "But you could spend the rest of the session just *searching*."

"Never fear," I replied confidently.

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"I know exactly where it is. It's in a burglar-proof vault on Rigel VII, guarded by a fire-breathing dragon."

The H.P. had no comment.

I landed my ship with no trouble, naturally. A crackling flame from the west told me where the dragon was. I looked around for my sword—ah, there it was. I grasped the hilt and easily pulled the sword out of the giant diamond in which it was embedded.

"I suppose that sword has a name," the H.P. said patiently.

"Of course! Wotan's Tooth. Made especially for biting dragons."

I swung Wotan's Tooth over my head three times and advanced toward my scaly adversary. The dragon belched a great orange blaze that flickered harmlessly around me.

"Why," asked the H.P. in a resigned tone, "did the flame not burn you?"

"Because," I said.

Fearlessly I stepped into the fray. Snicker-snack! went Wotan's Tooth—and the dragon's head lay at my feet. A hellish cry arose from the very rocks on the ground. (Lots of rocks on Rigel VII.)

I looked behind me. A woman with a veil over her face stepped from the rocks. "I am the Wicked Witch of the West," she said, "and you have slain my favorite dragon. For that, you die!"

As she began to remove her veil, I seized the Impenetrable Shield (hanging on a nearby tree) and held it in front of me. The W.W. of the W. shrieked as she saw her reflection in the shield. She turned to stone, of course.

"*Avarice*, Harriet," said the H.P. in a tired voice. "Remember avarice?"

"Just getting to it," I said. My superb knowledge of electronics soon enabled me to disengage the complicated alarm system built into the burglar-proof vault. I rubbed my fingertips briskly up and down my arm several times, and then began to turn the dial on the combination lock. In no time flat the heavy vault door swung open—and *voilà*! The philosopher's stone! I heard the H.P. breathe a sigh of relief.

I flew back to earth in my solid-gold spaceship. When I disembarked, the cheering crowd lifted me to its shoulders and carried me through the streets. In gracious acknowledgment of their adulation, I touched a few of their metal possessions with the stone.

"You're not there to play Lady Bountiful," the H.P. snarled. "Stop horsing around and get on with it!"

"But they're going to proclaim me Queen," I said.

Inside the palace, I soon had every metal object in the place transformed into gold. "Howzat?" I asked the H.P.

"It's a good start. But you must covet *more*. Don't you want more, Harriet?"

I thought a minute. "I could decree that all taxes be paid in lead. Then I could take the stone and—"

"Harriet, Harriet!" wailed the H.P. "Why must you complicate everything so? In a child's fantasy world, all you

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have to do is *wish* for what you want. Now get rid of that silly rock and start wishing!"

I leaned out one of the palace windows and dropped the philosopher's stone through a sewer grating, thus giving the city a solid-gold drainage system. Then I sat on my throne, closed my eyes, and said out loud: "I wish for a palaceful of thousand-dollar bills."

"That's more like it," the H.P. approved.

Alas, I had forgotten about the windows. They were all open; the money poured out in steady streams as a new supply simultaneously poured in. I had said a palace-*full*, and so what was lost through the windows had to be made up for. I could imagine the moat filling up with thousand-dollar bills as my people ran around happily gathering up this latest issue of U.S. currency.

"Close the windows, close the windows!" screamed the H.P.

"Unfortunately," I said, "I don't seem to be able to move. Do you have any idea how *heavy* paper money is?"

"Oh, well," sighed the H.P. as he disconnected me. "It seemed a good idea at the time."

The Sixth Session:

"For Gluttony," said the H.P., "we'll try simple *carte blanche*. Anything you like. Unless you're one of those people who eat only to stay alive?"

"Gracious, no. I like to eat."

"How fortunate. We'll send you into a gastronomic heaven. You'll have everything you want to eat and drink or ever wanted to try. How does that sound?"

"Delicious!"

"And *indulge*, Harriet. Eat your fill, eat more than your fill. Glut yourself. Eat until you go beyond the idea of mere gluttony. We won't let you eat yourself to death. But we want you to try."

"Gladly," I beamed.

"Anything in particular you'd like to have?"

"Well, let's see. I'll start off with a *potage de la Reine*, made with minced partridge instead of pheasant. I'm not one who likes to fuss over wine—any good Marsala will do."

"Marsala," repeated the H.P. He was making a list.

"And then an *andouille* and melon. Next, a *daube de boeuf à la béarnaise*. With a bottle of Château-Pichon-Longueville. Following that, I'll have roast woodcock and *carré d'agneau poêlé* with eggplant garnish. And make the wine a Pommard."

"Dear me," said the H.P., writing busily.

"And a variety of *béatilles* would be nice."

"*Béatilles?*"

"Truffles simmered in Madeira, that sort of thing. Surprise me."

The H.P. swallowed. "We'll do our best."

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"Oh—I almost forgot the fish. *Coquilles de saumon á la florentine* with a nice bottle of Barsac. And I think I'd like a *fricasée* of turtle—served with the shell on top, of course."

"Of course," the H.P. said in a small voice.

"Artichokes, cardoons, and celery. And a rum *blancmange* with a Montrachet. Could I have a couple of side dishes?"

"If you like." Faintly.

"Buisson d'asperges en croustade á la Carême. Greek cucumbers, French beans in cream, Flemish salad. Potatoes Anna. Endive loaf. Iced pineapple."

The H.P. was scribbling hastily. "Anything else?"

"Oh, yes—a simple cheese plate, with black bread and white grapes. No butter. The cheeses? Let me see. *Pont-l'Evêque, Septmoncel,* and *Brie de Melun*—the salty *Brie.* And a second-growth Médoc."

The H.P. muttered something.

"And now, dessert. An almond *crême. Apricots Bourdaloue*—made with musk apricots, the ones that grow in Algiers. And we'll round the whole thing off with a bottle of Lacrima Christi."

"Christs' tears indeed," said the H.P., checking through his list. "If this doesn't do it, nothing will. Ready?"

"Ready."

I lifted a spoonful of the *potage* and tasted it—and immediately put the spoon down again. Minced pheasant. I had distinctly specified partridge. Oh, well. Better things to come.

I took a sip of the Marsala. Disappointing. Just over the hill.

The *andouille* was oversalted and the melon wasn't quite ripe. And the *daube*—well, I could hardly believe my taste buds. The wine-and-brandy marinade for the beef had been seasoned with oregano instead of thyme. *Oregano,* for crying out loud! I pushed the dish away.

"What's the matter?" came the H.P.'s voice. "Why aren't you eating?"

I was so angry I didn't answer. I tried the woodcock; it was raw next to the bone. And that's the way the whole meal went. The salmon wasn't fresh, the artichokes were limp, the asparagus was overcooked. By the time the *crême* arrived, I was so disheartened I couldn't bring myself to taste it. I sat unspeaking until the H.P. saw fit to bring me back.

"Well? *Well!"* The H.P. was trembling. "Explain yourself, young lady!"

"It seems to me *you're* the one to do the explaining," I snapped. "You promise me a gastronomic delight and then proceed to botch every single dish! Every one! Even the wine was bad!"

"But you said—"

"I said I wasn't fussy about wine. But that doesn't mean I'm going to drink fermented Kool-Aid and like it! You should be ashamed!"

"Really, Harriet, you go too far.

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You can't—wait a minute! Where are you going?"

"Out to get a peanut butter and jelly sandwich."

"Out to—*what?* WHY?"

"Because there's no way to ruin peanut butter and jelly," I called back. Bitterly.

The Seventh Session:

"I've thought it over," said the H.P., "and I've decided I owe you an apology. I should have realized the kind of repast you were ordering brought into play a set of rules I'm not familiar with. I'm sorry the food wasn't up to your expectations."

"Especially the salmon." I don't forget easily. Not me.

"Er, especially the salmon. I've had to list yesterday's session as an all-out failure, but I've added a notation that the failure was my responsibility, not yours."

That was nice.

The H.P. changed the subject. "Perhaps you've noticed I'm in an especially cheerful frame of mind today." (I hadn't.) "The reason is that today is Lechery Day, and we've never had a Lechery failure yet." The man was positively glowing. "Ordinarily we select a moment in the patient's racial memory at random—any lusty situation seems to do the trick. But we can't depend on arbitrarily chosen ancestral regression for you, can we? You don't respond to treatment in ways we can anticipate. So I have consulted with my colleagues, and we've agreed the best procedure is to place you in a high-lust situation we've never used before."

"Never used before?"

"Not for lust. Because it wasn't necessary. But you're a special case, Harriet, and we thought it best not to take anything for granted. So we're going to put you into the most sex-charged atmosphere we could think of."

"Where? What?"

"Myth, Harriet! *Myth.*"

That wasn't quite what I was expecting. "You mean sex is mythical?"

"No, no—you don't understand. Myth is our way of making concrete and visible all those fears and impulses we have so much trouble understanding. And conquering. And that's what we're here for, isn't it? To conquer all those nasty primal fears?"

"*Amor vincit omnia,*" I said brightly.

"Ah...yes. Well. Take the Oedipus myth, for example. Every adult male has certain secret fears—that he is maimed or unwholesome, that he's not far removed from the killer beast, that he feels an unnatural attachment to his mother. So along comes Oedipus—he's lame in one foot, he kills a man who turns out to be his father, he marries his mother. Oedipus *does* all those terrible things we're afraid we might do—and thus shifts that particular burden of guilt from our shoulders for a while."

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That made sense.

"But only for a while," the H.P. continued. "The beauty of regression is that *we ourselves* do these things—and once having done them, we no longer fear we *might* do them. And that's what you're going to have the chance to do. You'll have the means of finding out what your own individual sexual proclivties are. The ones you don't consciously acknowledge."

I was fairly certain that I already knew what my own sexual proclivities were, but if the H.P. said otherwise—well, he knew best.

One thing bothered me. "You're not going to send me into *Greek* myth, are you?"

"Yes. Why? What's wrong?"

"I'm female," I pointed out. "You know what happens to women in those stories, don't you? Apollo or some other horny divinity casts a lustful eye on some poor wood nymph or a human who's just minding her own business—and the chase is on! And then some other god is always taking pity on the fleeing girl and turning her into a laurel tree or something. Not my idea of aid to the distressed."

"The answer to that is simple. Don't run. This is the Lechery session, remember."

"But it's not that easy! The Olympians are so quick to take offense—anything at all seems to set them off. You *breathe* wrong—and ZAP! You're poison ivy."

"Enough chit-chat—stop making excuses. Away with you! And remember—*don't run.*"

The sun was so bright I threw up my arm to shield my eyes. I turned my back to the source of light—and found myself facing the sun.

Puzzled, I glanced back over my shoulder. In the midst of the glare I could just make out a male form.

"Too bright for you?" asked a pleasant baritone voice. "Hold on a sec. I'll dim down a bit."

So it was *him*. He. The light gradually softened until I could see without straining. I took a good look at him—*and ran for my life.*

"Stop running!" screeched the H.P. "Go back there and get yourself screwed, you perverse child!"

I never knew I could move so fast. "I know why all those other girls ran," I puffed. "Look at the *size* of him—and it's not his shoulders I'm talking about. He's got a lust big enough to kill me!"

"Oh, dear," said the H.P. "We never thought of that."

Please, Zeus, I prayed silently, *not a laurel tree.* I looked back at Blond Beauty loping along easily behind me. "Can't you scale him down to human size?" I asked the H.P.

"Diminish a god? I'd rather not," he said plaintively. "It's so middle-class. Everybody does it."

"Well, then, how about enlarging *me?* Do *something*!"

"That's an idea! Hang on."

I felt myself beginning to grow. When I'd reached a reasonably divine

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size, I stopped running and turned to face my pursuer.

"Hi, there," I said. "You're Apollo, aren't you?"

"Righto, kid," he answered. "I'll find out *your* name afterwards."

Afterwards.

Actually, there was no afterwards. I would have been quite content to stay on in Mythville another six or seven hours, but the H.P. pulled me back. ("Enough is enough," he'd said.) On the whole, though, the H.P. was quite pleased. He said I had passed with flying colors.

At last.

Epilogue:

I have just been made a full-rank Jungian Fellow, funded by the Department of Health and Welfare. The usual cathartic requirements in the areas of Pride and Envy and the like were waived in consideration of my pioneering enterprise in Sexomythic Assimilation. A whole new field has opened up to the Jungians; I was even written up in *The American Journal of Regression* (Vol. XXX, No. 4, pp. 220-259).

Of course, there are some who say I didn't really earn my fellowship. That's to be expected, I suppose—always a few soreheads in the crowd. If you happen to be one of them—well, PEWSAGL to you.

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Here is a gripping story about a stranger who comes to a settlement on the Arctic ice. Its author sold her first sf story in 1972 and since then has published many short stories and a novel, TOO LONG A SACRIFICE (Dell). Ms. Broxon tells us that she lives on a houseboat in Seattle with her husband William, a cat, and two large boa constrictors. A large cat, we hope.

Walk the Ice

BY

MILDRED DOWNEY BROXON

The scene dominated one wall: bergs grumbled on a grey nothern sea. A breeze whispered among glittering snow-crystals, and gulls screeched. But the retirement home at Sitka was far from any Arctic shore. This seascape was only a video-sound projection, and the air was warm.

Anagan checked the clock. It was time. She touched a control, and the Bering Sea faded. It was replaced on the video screen by rows of eager young faces: commencement exercises at the Explorers Academy. This first graduating class numbered only twenty. There, in the third row, sat Nakarak, her four-times great-granddaughter. Long had Anagan waited for this day, so long that her age now forbade travel. Well, no matter. As the retired Presidential Advisor of the United North, she could command—and afford—a direct videocast.

This all started many years ago, Anagan mused. I didn't understand what happened then, of course, but I wrote it down. I don't even have the paper any more. I don't need to read it. I remember everything—

I had seen seven ice breakups. In the winter following my seventh autumn freeze, the stranger came. Earlier, hunting had been good: plenty of seal and walrus lay on the meat rack, and the traps caught many foxes. The women were kept busy scraping and softening the skins.

There were four houses in our winter settlement. In one earth-and-stone house lived Mother, Father, Father's mother, and myself.

Deep winter had passed; we were nearing spring. Sun peeped out for longer periods at midday. One of the men sighted an early-rising polar bear

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on the sea ice. Sharp-boned and ragged after his long sleep, the bear walked with a staggering gait. All four hunters, their half-grown sons, and the dogs went out on the ice to kill him. As happened, though, the bear was not as sleepy as he seemed. Father would have shot him from a safe distance, but he felt a patch of thin ice beneath the snow. He stepped back and slipped. His rifle fell from his grip, broke the ice and sank. Father knelt, looking after it. The only rifle in the settlement—it may as well have never been. Father had gotten it for many foxes from a hunter farther south, who traded skins to the white men.

The others looked away in silence, not to embarrass him. Father laughed: "It seems someone wishes to hunt in the old way." So with nothing but bone-tipped harpoons they went against the bear. It slew three hunters and eight dogs.

Father and the half-grown boys dragged the carcass back to the settlement, where they portioned it out and buried the men. The son of the man who first struck the bear got the choicest meat.

As Father was now the only great hunter, he must go after seal to feed the rest. The young boys hunted also, but they caught little. Father's catch was good. Mother carried portions to the other families and laid the rest on the common meat rack.

Something bad hung over that winter. Perhaps the spirits of the dead men wandered and frightened the animals. Perhaps the woman under the sea wanted her hair combed, and none came to help her, so she held back the game. Who knows? Every time Father had to go farther out on the ice for seals.

One night long after dark, when the Northern Lights flickered, he came back riding the runners behind his sled. His left leg was lashed to a harpoon shaft.

He would not say what had happened—a hole in the ice, a dogfight where the traces wrapped around him and he was dragged—Mother did not ask. She drew off his boots and outer clothing. I saw white and red bone-ends poking through his skin. Mother brought meat around to the other houses, then came home to prepare a meal.

Father lay quiet and did not eat. Father's mother rocked and crooned—she was very old. Often she thought herself young again, and beautiful. She was able to keep her soapstone lamp burning, however, and she was good for chewing the fat from skins. Toothless, her gums could not tear holes in them.

Now that the settlement no longer had a mighty hunter, the other families thought they might visit friends and relatives. The nearest village was only three days away in good weather. Mother decided to stay with Father and see if he could be made stronger to travel. He was sick, burning, and

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crazy. Mother could not carry him to the sled, and he could neither walk nor understand why he must try.

So we stayed, Mother, Father Grandmother, and I. The other families left us meat, taking only what they and their dogs would need on the journey, plus gifts for their hosts.

We stood outside that night and watched the Northern Lights writhe and hiss. Grandmother said it meant someone would die. True, ever since Father came home injured, the Lights had been brighter and noisier than usual. I whistled to see if they would answer me, but they paid no heed.

That night the stranger came. We were still outside looking at the Lights, hearing Father babble in fever, when I saw a dark shape far out on the sea-ice. The Lights were bright enough so that frozen billows and bergs gleamed white, and the stars shone thick where the glow had not blotted them out. The shape walked so clumsily I wondered if it might be a bear. As it came closer I saw it was only a bit taller than man-size. It staggered.

"A young person has noticed that a stranger approaches," I said to Mother. She stood watching. She would not go out to meet him, the man of the house should do that, but she would stand and give greeting. She sighed. "When guests come it is good that there is food to offer." Grandmother mumbled something and went back into the house. I stayed beside Mother.

The stranger saw us, held up his arms, and changed course. When he reached shore he fell to his knees. We waited. If he did not need help, it would be an insult to offer it. He was an adult.

After a time he rose and came closer. "Come visit us," Mother said, as if he had stopped by on a stroll. He made a strange sound. She led him inside.

"Husband," she said to Father, "someone does not wish to be forward, but it seems a stranger has come across the ice."

Father groaned.

"Anagan," Mother said, "go fetch some meat from the rack." To the stranger she said, "I have, of course, nothing to offer you save some food the dogs scorned, for my husband is not a great hunter. I am ashamed to lay such fare before a guest. Perhaps you would do best to travel on." This showed she wanted me to bring the finest piece, and so I went out under the stars, groped my way to the meat rack, and brought back a seal liver.

All this time the stranger said nothing. Mother and Grandmother made to remove his boots, but he drew back. After I returned with the raw frozen liver, I watched him, when he did not see me. I brushed close; his clothes were smooth and cold, not like furs, and they did not seem thick enough. He must be freezing. And he was thin, so thin, and tall. Never had I seen a living man so thin.

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His face was covered with some sort of gut, only more transparent, like ice. Behind it his skin showed blue and rough. His eyes were yellow, very large. I could not see the rest of him, as he was covered in a tight frost-bright garment. His hands must have been frozen at one time, for he was missing some of his fingers. He had only two, and a thumb, on each hand. It must have been a long time past, as his wife had sewn him gloves to fit.

Still he said nothing. He had a box with him, about the size of a sewing box. He worked at it with his poor hands. I thought it impolite to stare. It made a hissing sound, like the Northern Lights.

Mother cut the liver on a flat stone. Her flint knife was sharp, but not as sharp as the metal knives we'd seen. Next year Father had promised to get her one. This year he had needed the rifle. She feigned shame—Mother was very polite—and said, "I regret this piece of offal is all the meat rack held. Perhaps my stupid daughter found it among the dogs' leavings?" Still the stranger said nothing, though he should, in turn, praise the fine meat. This would be mannerly. He looked around at the sleeping platform heaped with skins, the stone lamps, Father's bone-tipped harpoon, Mother's flint knife, and made a low sound. He clasped his mutilated hands and stared at the roof.

Mother handed him a piece of seal liver. It was thawing now, and dripped with juice. My own mouth watered. I wondered if the stranger was hungry; he made another low sound and flinched back. Then he quieted, picked up the meat, and looked at it.

Mother waited. He loosed the covering over his face, took one small bite—he had small sharp teeth, like a seal—and set it down. He sat trembling as blood ran down his chin. It made me hungry to see. At last he took his piece of liver and ate it whole.

Then we all could eat. Even Father came out of his raving for a time. He tried to talk with the stranger, man's talk, of hunting, dogs, and weather, but the stranger could only make animal sounds. When we had gorged enough—I made several more trips to the meat rack—Father asked if the stranger would like Mother for the night, since he was traveling without a woman. Our guest did not answer. Perhaps he was deaf-mute. Even in her condition, Mother was very pretty.

In any case, he took the cold place on the side bench, away from the main sleeping platform. In the night we heard him outside being sick. He must have starved a long time, then gorged too quickly. This can happen to anyone. We all went back to sleep.

Over the next few days Father's leg began to stink. He did not know where he was; he babbled. The stranger finally tried to see what he could do. He even took off his gloves.

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His poor hands! Not only had they been frozen, but the skin was blue and scaly. Between the scales grew fine golden hairs. I had never known cold that could do that.

He drew back Father's sleeping-skin, looked at the hurt leg, then hissed. He fumbled in his pouch and pulled out a small bladder. When he poured the liquid on the wound, it bubbled, and Father screamed. Steam rose. Quickly the stranger grabbed the water pot and emptied it over Father's leg. The steaming stopped. He stepped back and looked, once again, at his poor mutilated hands. The nails were black claws. He drew the gut-covering back over his face, put his gloves on, and stepped outside.

I should not have followed him. It was plain he wished to be alone. But I was young and discourteous.

He walked around the settlement, peering into the three abandoned houses. He stopped and surveyed the nearly empty meat rack, paused to examine Father's dogsled—it was a fine one, with bone runners—and stood looking at our team. They howled and leapt at him, but since they were tethered they could do no harm. Nonetheless he stepped back. He was no sled-driver, then. Those were good dogs.

He stood looking for a long time out over the ice, next to the stone-heaped hill where we bury our dead. Was he talking with the ancestors? He had not spoken a word with us. He'd taken his box along and once again began to work with it. The Lights danced overhead, and the box hissed in time to their writhing. Then he put it down and sat in the snow, curled up, forehead on knees. I was afraid, after a time, that he would freeze, and so I went up to him. "Someone sits in the cold snow," I said, "when a warm house stands nearby." He looked up at me. In the dark, his yellow eyes had turned green. He blinked. I held out my hand and led him back indoors. At times he was as forgetful as Grandmother.

Then the storm struck. Even had Father been well, he could not have ventured forth to hunt. The meat rack made empty music with the wind. Once Mother almost got lost looking for it, though it was only a few steps outside the door. Beyond, all was white whistling blowing drifts. The dogs curled beneath the snow, and we huddled inside and told stories, watching our food run out.

All but the stranger. He had no stories to relate—he kept mute. At times he would run one scaly blue finger over the soapstone lamp, or fiddle with the useless box he carried, but mostly he crouched in the corner, rocking back and forth like Grandmother did.

After a time we sang to dull the pain in our bellies. There was nothing else to do. Father did not realize his singing-partner was dead, killed by the

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bear, and so he sang his own part and then the other's—the last, using the dead man's voice. I looked outside to make sure the man had not thrown off his mound of frozen stones to join us. But the night held only wind.

The stranger listened and, when Father was done, made some odd noises of his own. Perhaps that was his sort of music. It sounded like the creak of thick ice near breakup.

Grandmother, in her turn, sang a lament. At times she remembered how old she was, and became sad.

Ay-ah, ay-ah, a woman once was young.
Ay-ah, ay-ah, a woman once was beautiful.
Once great hunters fought over a woman,
Once she pleasured many men.
Ay-ah, ay-ah, a woman once could travel.
Ay-ah, ay-ah, a woman once was young. Ay-ah.

Hunger and sickness made Father worse. He fought things only he could see. I do not know how he got up to thrash about the house, staggering, but he knocked over both Mother's and Grandmother's lamps. Mother screamed and beat out the spreading flames with her hands, then put Father back to bed. We sat in the dark.

Kindling a fire is a long, weary task. Mother sighed and began, when a light flared from the stranger's corner. He waited until she refilled the lamp and adjusted the wick, then he touched his flame to the moss. It flared.

I wanted him to do it again. I asked him. He seemed to understand, for he made fire from nothing several times, until he grew tired of child's play and put it back into his pouch.

So the stranger was good for something after all: he could not hunt, sing, or talk, but he *could* light a fire.

When the storm was at its height, Mother's time came. I knew a baby was due soon, but we did not know when. Father could not give a husband's help. The stranger knew nothing. So the task fell to Grandmother and me. I had seen births before, of course. Only last year my baby brother had been born, in the winter. He lived ten days. Mother had little trouble this time, and Grandmother remembered what else must be done. Soon a girl baby was trying to suckle.

Mother did not give much milk. She had been too long hungry. She spoke no name for the baby. I knew what that could mean.

When the storm quieted, Grandmother rose from the sleeping platform and put on her boots, trousers, and parka. "Someone would like to take a walk," she said.

"I'll come along, Grandmother." I was afraid.

"What, am I so old I cannot walk by myself?" Her tone was hard, but her eyes were kind. She patted me on the head, even though I had been impolite. I should have said nothing. Mother,

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who always had perfect manners, pretended not to notice, and kept trying to nurse the baby. Should her mother-in-law not go outside if she wished? Father saw nothing by now. As Grandmother stepped into the passageway, the stranger put one hand on her arm as if to detain her. She brushed him aside. I held his hand to keep him from following. The poor mutilated fingers were clenched inside his glove. He, too, knew.

The next day we went out and found Grandmother. We buried her under a heap of stones on the hill and mourned her for the proper time. During that time, when none of us went anywhere, or even took off our clothes, Father died as well. Mother and the stranger carried him out to lie with the rest of the dead. Again we mourned.

We were all getting thin, but the stranger, I noticed, was thinning faster than the rest of us, and his mouth was cracked and bleeding. Mother's milk dried up. She decided we must kill and eat one of the dogs. The dogs themselves were starving now, with little meat on them. What there was made us feel sick. Those were good sled dogs, well-trained. Once we ate them all, of course, there would be no hope. How could we cross the ice? So we tried to wait as long as possible between killings. Something might happen, and we would have part of the team left.

New storms blew up. Even had people from the next village been trying to send help, they could not have traveled.

Little sister cried and then only whimpered. One day Mother called me to her. "All my milk is gone. The baby is starving. It would be cruel to let her suffer. You are starving too." We had saved some sealskin lines to eat at the last. I helped her take one and strangle little sister, as Mother was very weak now. When it would have been my turn to die, I said, "Life is not yet heavier than death, Mother. I will try to fend for myself." So she let me live, even though she was a concerned mother and did not want to see her children starve.

I decided to go for help. The stranger was very sick, and of no use. One would think he would walk out on the ice. Mother was almost too weak to move. We still had four dogs, and so I killed one for food and harnessed the other three. That was not enough dogs to pull a normal load, but I was only a small child, and quite thin by now. I could run most of the way.

The stranger saw me loading up and made as if to ask where I was going. By now we could talk by sign, a bit. So I pointed to Mother and myself, wiggled my fingers to show "many more people," then pointed toward the next settlement. I also pretended to be eating. The stranger offered to come along.

He would be little help, but there would be more dog meat left for

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Mother, and the stranger was taller than I: he might help right the sled, if it overturned in a drift. So I let him come. He brought his box.

He walked at first, behind the sled. The dogs were weak, even after eating part of their dead teammate, and they only trotted. Soon the stranger became tired and climbed onto the sled to lie atop the sleeping-skins. He weighed very little by then, hardly more than I did. If I ran behind and helped the runners over rough places, the burden did not slow the dogs much.

When night came I tried to build a snow hut. I was not skilled at cutting the blocks—this was men's work, though I had watched—and I never managed to dome the roof, but at least we were sheltered from the wind.

The next day I had to help the stranger onto the sled. Earlier he tried to harness the dogs, but blood seeped through his gloves and stained the snow. The dogs broke loose and licked it, then howled.

Of course we had no food along, but I had Grandmother's lamp. I even had some oil, and we could melt ice for water, which filled the stomach. The stranger should not have been so weak.

Later that day the lead bitch lay down in the traces and was dragged until she died. I loaded her thin body on the sled. When we stopped, I cut off a haunch for ourselves and fed the rest to the two remaining dogs. The stranger would not eat the meat. The next day he could scarcely crawl to the sled.

Fed, the dogs pulled more briskly. I began to feel cheerful. Sun sparkled the snow for a longer time in midday. We might reach the other village after all. One more night on the trail, and we could have food, and warmth, and see other people. If we got there in time we could even send help to Mother. I was learning to build snow huts, too. This night my roof stayed up. I lit the lamp—*my* lamp now, my woman's lamp—and the hut grew warm. I slept well.

I slept so well that I did not hear the stranger rise in the night. When I woke, his box lay atop the sleeping-skins. I was afraid for him.

Outside, away from the sled, toward the sea ice, I saw his tracks. When I found him he was cold and stiff, his poor hurt hands clasped, his head on his knees. The blood that trickled down his chin was frozen now, and his skin was grey, not blue. So—he'd realized he was a burden, and took the honorable way.

I dragged him back to the snow hut. I had no place to bury him. I loaded his box on the sled—he had left it for me— and set off.

I was not an expert driver. When the dogs overturned the lightly laden sled, the box flew off into a drift and I could not find it. When I loosed the team they ran off, howling, back the way we had come.

I went on afoot. It was not far,

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now. I would live. A little later, under the crackling Northern Lights, I reached the village just ahead of a ten-day storm.

When the blizzard cleared, help went for Mother, but by the time they reached her she was dead. They stopped at my snow house on the way, to sleep. I had not mentioned the stranger, for he had no name. Inside they found blood and a few shreds of skin and odd-shaped bones. A little farther on, they found my two dogs, dead, their bellies swollen as if with poison.

They never told me the last, but I heard the whispers: when they found Mother they also found the baby's body, and Father's. Pieces were missing. There were human toothmarks on the bones. These things happen, at the extremes of hunger, but people do not speak of them.

So they kept me on in the village, as an orphan. I wore castoff clothing and ate scraps of food, but no one pitied me. They knew that if I suffered when I was young I would always be resourceful, no matter what life brought. I survived; I neither froze nor starved.

The next year white traders set up a post in the village. That winter I began coughing. The white men called it "tuberculosis." Several in the village had the same cough. They sent me to the mission hospital farther south. There, for the sick children, the missionaries ran a school. At school I learned about other people, white men and the rest who do not have the Inuit speech, even people who live where there is no snow. I learned to read and write, and my world grew large. But I never read of anyone like the stranger.

In the mission school, Anagan bent over the lined yellow paper. Her braids trailed across her desk. She finished her composition and took it forward. "Here, Sister," she said. "You asked us to write how it was at home."

Sister smiled at her star pupil and began to read. When she had finished she frowned and marked the paper with a large red D. "Anagan, come up here!"

Once more, Anagan approached the front of the room. "Yes, Sister?" She bobbed a curtsey.

"You should be ashamed, Anagan. A little girl, telling lies like that. Write me another essay, something that *really* happened." She handed back the pages.

Anagan put them carefully in her desk, coughed, and bent over another sheet of paper. It was impolite to argue. But she kept her essay, over the years.

Had it not been for tuberculosis, she would never have gone on to school; as it was, she was too weak to return to her village. In a few years her people were wiped out by a smallpox epidemic. Anagan stayed South and continued her education.

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Eventually Anagan began to suspect who, or what, the stranger might have been. But she kept her own counsel and hid her essay in a safe place.

Years passed.

When the speaker finished, they'd hand out the diplomas and the ceremony would be over. Nakarak sat among her classmates and looked out at the starry backdrop. It resembled a curtain but was really a huge picture-window. Far in the distance stood the tiny dome-covered monument at Tranquility Base.

Wait—what was the speaker saying? "Even though we have not yet encountered any alien races, nor have we any assurance that we will, we have already trained our first Xenology graduates." he paused for effect.

Yes, Nakarak thought, *I'm one of them, though sometimes I wonder if I should have gone into planetology or navigation.*

"In addition," the speaker continued, "we have today, in our first graduating class, the many-times great-granddaughter of a woman who, more than anyone else, made the Explorers Academy possible. Much of our early funding came from the United North. It was Anagan, as Presidential Advisor, who was largely responsible for that funding. Older nations, not to be outdone, also contributed. Perhaps because—" he chuckled, "the North would'nt sell them oil if they didn't. It was fitting, Anagan said, that since the Arctic had once been called the Last Frontier, it should support exploration of the *real* Last Frontier, Space." He paused again; the audience applauded. "We'd hoped Anagan could be here today, but her health did not permit. She did, however, send something to pass on to her descendant. Nakarak, would you come forward?"

Nakarak could feel herself blushing. She hardly knew Anagan; for years the old woman had been too feeble to travel, and Nakarak herself had spent most of the past five years on the Moon. Light in the one-sixth gravity, she walked to the front of the auditorium, shook the speaker's hand, and took her diploma and sealed envelope. She returned to her seat and opened the latter. It held lined yellow paper, covered with a childish scrawl. The ink was brown and the edges had crumbled.

She'll read it first chance she gets, Anagan knew. *It should make her glad about studying Xenology.*

This was enough. Her own flesh and blood would travel space. She herself had always been too old—sixty-nine at the first Moon landing, eighty-two when the anti-aging drugs were discovered, eighty-five when Alaska and Siberia formed the United North.

The ceremony was over. The graduates filed out to accept congratulations and take assignments. Anagan switched the picture back. On the grey

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north sea, bergs still drifted, ice slurry swept the shore, snow sparkled. Some things never changed.

From the Stone Age to the Space Age in my lifetime. When the stranger came, we had neither writing nor metalcraft; Nakarak, child, what will you bring home from the stars? She would never know.

She watched the ice as twilight thickened. She rocked back and forth in her chair and chanted,

Ay-ah, ay-ah, a woman once could travel,
Ay-ah, ay-ah, a woman once was young.

The ice ground on, hundreds of miles away. She could never walk that far. She'd finish here. But Nakarak would walk other worlds, and Anagan had led, on the whole, an interesting life. It was enough. There was really nothing to lament.

When they found her body, she was still smiling at the ice.

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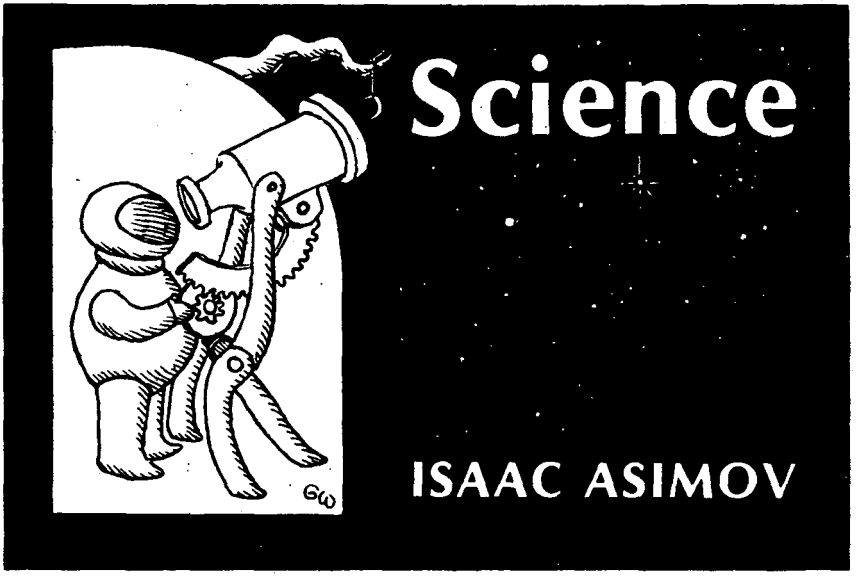

ALL AND NOTHING

It was back in 1967, I think, that I read J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* for the first time. I liked it—moderately. I felt it went on too long, that there was too much irrelevant detail, that the battle scenes were a bit wearisome.

I have since read it four more times and have just finished the fifth reading.

Each time I liked it better than the time before, and on this fifth occasion I clamored restlessly against having it end at all. Far from thinking it went on too long, I bitterly resented Tolkien having waited so long to start it that he ended with only time to write half a million words.

It's fair to wonder why I should like it better each time I read it. After all, with each reading, the details of the plot are more firmly ground into my head and there is less chance of any suspense.

But then it's not the plot that counts. That can be summarized in a few pages, and one is glad to have it over and done with. Once one gets to know the plot very well, one can ignore it and not be so concerned with following it that one misses the more subtle beauties. (Naturally, this is only true of a book that is more than the sum of its plot.)

What pleased me more and more, each time I read it, was the intricate

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construction of the whole. In particular, I am pleased with the way in which the epic starts small, separates into two parts then has those parts rejoin and end small.

What's more, of the two parts, one is a colossal war that grows more and more extensive and intensive until it encompasses the whole world and threatens all of it with eternal destruction, while the other has a focus that is ever-narrowed into a smaller and smaller compass until it ends with two small beings taking weary step after weary step up the side of a volcano.

From large to small we go, then from smaller to larger, then from still larger to still smaller—and in the end it is the small that counts. The apparent nothing saves the all.

Tolkien plays fair. He tells you all along that that's the way it will be, but telling you doesn't count. He *shows* you. And though I know that the nothing will save the all, and exactly how—each time I read the epic I appreciate and admire and enjoy the artistry of the technique more.

"All art," said Seneca, the Roman philosopher, "is but an imitation of nature."

Yes, but some aspects of nature are discovered after the construction of a particular piece of art, and if the art is valid, it will surely seem that nature imitates art.

For instance—

If we want to consider the "all" as far as the world of sense impressions is concerned, we can do no better than to consider the Universe. There is the Earth, which is part of the Solar system, which is part of the Galaxy made up of a hundred billion or so suns, which is in turn but one of a hundred billion or so galaxies.

And if we look at the Universe, we find that one of its fundamental overall characteristics is that it is expanding. The galaxies exist in groups, some small and some large, and all of these groups are steadily moving away from each other. This expansion is, presumably, the result of an initial explosive event—the "big bang."

Given the rate of expansion, it is possible to calculate the date of the beginning of the Universe with some degree of confidence as I pointed out in last month's essay.

But what about the other end of the arrow of time? What is the ending of the Universe and how far off is it?

We might argue that though there is a limit to how far back in time we can go, since the Universe gets smaller as we move back in time and must

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some time reach zero volume, there is no limit to how far forward in time we can go. The farther forward we go the larger the Universe gets, but it is difficult to see how there can be any maximum size past which it cannot go. It can expand forever and can, in that sense, have no ending.

To use a simple analogy, suppose the Earth were alone in the Universe and there was an object a mile above the surface of the Earth that was moving upward at a constant speed. We can tell when it started its journey because if we consider the situation further and further back in time, we would be aware of the object located closer and closer to the surface of the Earth. At some time in the past, the object would have been on the surface, and that would represent the moment at which it began its upward journey.

However, if we consider the situation further and further forward in time, the object would be moving higher and higher, and since there is nothing in the upward direction to stop it, we could conclude that it would travel forever and its journey would have no end.

An infinitely expanding Universe is an "open Universe." If we suppose that the Universe is open, we can see that eventually, after the passing of some vast time period, the various clusters of galaxies will be separated by such huge distances that no one cluster can be detected from any other. In that case, intelligent observers on Earth (or some other equivalent vantage point) in the far future would be able to see only objects in our own Galaxy or in the other galaxies of what is called the "Local Group." Aside from that, the Universe would seem empty.

There might be changes in the basic properties of the Universe as a result of the continuing expansion. Some argue that the intensity of the gravitational force decreases as the Universe expands. Less controversially, it is argued that the average temperature of the Universe drops as it expands (it is only about three degrees above absolute zero right now—on the average).

If we ignore the possibility of such changes, we might conclude that the mere expansion of the Universe in this fashion would cost ordinary people nothing, however much astronomers might regret the loss of the outer galaxies. After all, the only objects we can see in the sky at all, with the unaided eye, are the nearer stars of our own Galaxy, plus such other members of the Local Group as the Magellanic Clouds and the Andromeda galaxy. Even with a telescope that would leave much to study.

Nor would we have need to feel hampered even if we possessed the capacity for easy interstellar flight. Our Local Group contains about a tril-

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lion stars, and surely that is not an ungenerous figure.

But then, we can't expect our stars to remain unchanged. According to the second law of thermodynamics (see last month's essay) we know that available energy is going to come to an end some day. The stars will each consume its fuel and collapse. The smaller stars will collapse relatively quietly to white dwarfs, which will slowly cool off to black dwarfs.

Larger stars will explode and collapse to neutron stars or even to black holes. Eventually, white dwarfs and neutron stars would sweep up enough mass on their voyage through space to collapse further to black holes, while the black holes will become steadily larger and more massive.

It would seem then that all the mass of the Universe might end up eventually as part of one black hole or another; that in place of each galaxy there may be an enormously massive black hole representing its core, with possibly planetary black holes of smaller size representing each a portion of its outskirts. These black holes would exist in clusters, large and small, representing the galactic clusters, and all the clusters of black holes would be forever receding from each other.

It is now believed, however, that black holes evaporate slowly. This evaporation proceeds more rapidly the smaller the black hole is, and the lower the average temperature of the Universe is. Under present conditions the rate at which the typical black hole picks up matter from its surroundings far outweighs any evaporative tendency.

As we move forward in time, however, there will come a period when there is virtually no non-black-hole matter to absorb and when continued expansion will have lowered the average temperature of the Universe many times closer to absolute zero than it now is. The evaporation of black holes will then dominate, and they will shrink slowly, producing matter that will spread out as a fine, thin cloud of dust, atoms, and subatomic particles, growing ever finer and thinner.

And that will be the end. Entropy will never be at quite a maximum, for it will continue to increase, though more and more slowly, as the Universe continues to expand.

But I keep saying "eventually." How long is "eventually?"

The Universe is very likely 15 eons old (15,000,000,000 years, that is) although as I explained last month there is some recent dispute about this. The small red dwarfs, however, which make up three-fourths of all the stars, and which use their hydrogen fuel stingily, can trickle out their lifetimes as normal stars over a period of 200 eons. (Compare this with the Sun's lifetime, as a normal star, of about 12 eons.)

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This means that even those red dwarfs which were created in the infancy of the Universe are still in their youth and have expended less than a tenth of their fuel-store.

And new stars form continually, since there remains uncondensed gas and dust in the interstellar spaces and since still more is added to the supply continually as supernovas explode. To be sure, as old gas and dust condenses and as new super-nova born material is added, the hydrogen content of the gas and dust out of which new stars are made steadily decreases while the heavy-element components steadily increase. In the end, the fuel will be all gone, but I don't see how this can take less than 1,000 eons.

And how long will it take for white dwarfs and neutron stars to grow cold? For all matter to find its way into one black hole or another? For all the black holes to evaporate so that the Universe is nothing but a thin vapor growing ever-thinner?

I don't know. I have never seen a reasonable estimate, but I suspect it would take an enormous number of years, quite beyond meaning. In such a Universe the length of time during which life as we know it would be possible would be, comparatively, the merest instant of history—the instant, of course, in which we happen to be passing through.

I don't like the picture of an open Universe. If that is how things are, I must accept it whether I like it or not—but is there possibly another interpretation of the Universe?

Suppose we go back to the analogy of the object rising upward from the surface of the Earth. I suggested that it was rising upward at a constant velocity, but that is impossible, of course. The rising object is subjected to Earth's gravitational pull at all times, and therefore its upward velocity is steadily being slowed. It is moving upward more and more slowly.

If Earth's gravitational pull were constant with distance, then no matter how quickly the object was moving upward, its velocity would be bled away until it was zero. The object would, in other words, stop moving upward, halt momentarily, and then start falling.

Earth's gravitational pull weakens with distance, however. If the object is moving upward at more than a certain velocity, it increases its distance from Earth's center so rapidly that the gravitational pull drops too quickly to slow that velocity effectively. The velocity, in that case, *never* decreases to zero with respect to Earth, and the object *never* falls back again. The minimum velocity at which this happens is the "escape velocity" (see OF CAPTURE AND ESCAPE, F&SF, May 1959).

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At velocities lower than escape velocity, the object moving upward will eventually slow to a momentary halt and begin to fall (though it will attain a greater height than it would if Earth's gravitational pull did not decrease with distance).

The expanding Universe is much in the position of the object moving upward from Earth's surface. The Universe *cannot* expand at a uniform rate with time because it is expanding against the pull of its own overall gravitational field. The rate of expansion must, therefore, be slowing.

The question, then, is whether the rate of expansion is above or below the escape velocity of matter with respect to the overall gravitational field of the Universe. If it is above the escape velocity then the Universe is open and will expand forever. If it is below the escape velocity then we have a "closed Universe," one that will expand at a slower and slower rate until it comes to a momentary halt and will then start contracting again. A contracting Universe will occupy a smaller and smaller volume with time, until a volume is reached which is so small that it will trigger a new big bang. The process will then continue forever into the future and will have been continuing forever in the past—like an object falling and bouncing, rising to a slowing halt then falling and bouncing, rising to a slowing halt and so on.

Nor is anything lost between bounces, or big bangs. Not only is all the matter of the Universe retrieved in the course of the contraction, but all the immaterial radiation as well.

Radiation does not move in a straight line. If it did we might imagine it moving forever outward and escaping regardless of whether the matter of the Universe were expanding or contracting. Instead, radiation follows the curve of an Einsteinian Universe, with the presence of matter producing the curves to varying degrees of tightness. In an open Universe, such a curved path, whatever its local veering, spirals outward indefinitely on the whole. In a closed Universe, on the other hand, such a curved path spirals outward to a definite limit, then spirals inward again.

In a closed Universe, there is no true beginning, no true ending. The Universe repeats itself endlessly, and we can only speak of the beginning and ending of a particular oscillation (the "wavelength of the Universe," so to speak). How long an interval there is between big bangs depends on how intensely closed the Universe is, and my own guess is that if the Universe were closed, the interval might approach 1000 eons. —Just a guess.

I feel attracted to the notion of the closed Universe. It is cyclic and neat and it offers a new chance for life at each oscillation. Therefore, I want it to exist.

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Unfortunately, a closed Universe won't exist just because I want it to. Whether it exists or not depends on what the evidence tells us, in other words on whether the present rate of expansion is above the Universal escape velocity or below it.

Given a particular rate of expansion, the escape velocity depends on the intensity of the general gravitational field of the Universe which depends, in turn, on the average density of matter in the Universe.

Thus, *if* the rate of expansion is such that a galaxy's speed of recession increases by 50 kilometers per second for every million parsecs additional distance from us (a generally accepted figure despite recent questioning of it), then the average density of the Universe must be about 5×10^{-30} grams per cubic centimeter as a minimum for the Universe to be closed.

The volume of the Universe, at present, is about 1085 cubic centimeters (a 1 followed by 85 zeroes). If the Universe had just the minimum average density required for it to be closed, its total mass would then be $5 \times 10^{-30} \times 10^{85}$, or 5×10^{55} grams, or 2.5×10^{22} times the mass of our Sun. For a closed Universe, there would have to be the equivalent of 25,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 (25,000 million trillion) Sun-sized stars in the Universe.

The trouble is that the average density of the Universe, judging from the mass of the average galaxy and the average distance between galaxies, is no more than 1/100 that minimum, so that there are the equivalent of only 250 million trillion Sun-sized stars in the Universe.

That means that the gravitational field of the Universe is only 1/100 as intense as it ought to be to be able to bring the universal expansion to an eventual halt. Therefore, the Universe is open, and this period of life-potentiality is and will be (as far as we know) the only one ever.

Can we possibly be wrong? Can the average density of the Universe be higher than we think it is—a hundred times higher at least?

It might occur to you, perhaps, that the Universe may be a hundred times larger than we think it is, that if we had better telescopes we could see five times farther out and see more and more galaxies.

That wouldn't work. The trouble would be that the new mass would be occupying new volume, and the overall density of the universe (which is mass divided by volume) would not change.

What we need is additional mass *within the volume we now observe.* This is the problem of the "missing mass."

You might think that there is no problem. The missing mass just isn't there and the Universe is open, and just because Asimov wants the

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Universe to be closed isn't going to produce the mass.

Well, I have faith in the beauty of nature, and whereas a closed Universe is beautiful, an open Universe is not (and I have committed myself to a closed Universe in print over a number of years). Besides there is the matter of galactic clusters.

If the mass and volume of a galactic cluster is determined (as nearly as possible) and if the average density of matter over the region occupied by that cluster is calculated it almost always turns out that the general gravitational field of the cluster is not sufficient to keep the individual galaxies within the cluster. What is more, the larger the cluster, the greater the percentage by which the gravitational field falls short.

And yet the galactic clusters seem to be definitely closed. As nearly as we can tell they are not breaking up but are holding together. The missing mass, in galactic clusters at least, cannot therefore really be missing, if there is any meaning to celestial mechanics. The missing mass must be there somehow even though we don't see it, and if it is true of the galactic clusters, it must be true of the Universe as a whole.

But where can the mass be? Of course, we can't always see massive objects. Stars shine, but black holes don't, and a black hole without any matter near by to fall in and release x-rays, might have a wholly unexpected existence, and we might all be innocently overlooking its mass.

Suppose, for instance, there were very massive black holes at the center of each galaxy, black holes so massive that each would be far more massive than the galaxy itself. In that case, might not each galaxy be a hundred times more massive than we expect, the density of the Universe a hundred times greater than we think, and the Universe closed?

But that is not the answer. We don't estimate the mass of a galaxy by the number of stars we see in it, so that it is not a case of neglecting the invisible. The mass of a galaxy can be determined, for instance, from its diameter and its speed of rotation. The rate at which its outer stars wheel depends very largely on the mass of the galactic core (which makes up about 90 percent of the mass of the whole). In this way we determine the mass reliably, black holes and all. The hidden mass cannot be lurking in black holes at the galactic core.

In that case, suppose we look outside the cores. Suppose that the galaxies themselves are larger than we imagine, that they stretch out in a thin powdering of stars and dust and gas—a kind of "galactic atmosphere." The usual methods for determining galactic masses ignore the possibility of such galactic atmospheres, but although they are thinly spread out they might

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fill the vast spaces between the galaxies and multiply the total mass and density a hundred fold.

There is, in fact, some indication of a thin powdering of stars, dust and gas stretching out beyond the visible rims of galaxies. This does supply additional mass but, as far as we can tell, not nearly enough. They might add 1/10 the known mass, but surely not 100 times the known mass. If the galactic atmospheres were dense enough to do that, they would be sufficiently noticeable to leave us in no doubt.

But again, let us go back to black holes—not at the core this time, but spread out through space generally. If they and their mass went generally unnoticed and could not be detected by studies of galaxies themselves, might that be the answer?

Possibly, but since we don't see such black holes or detect them in any way, or have any evidence whatever that they're there, it is difficult to feel confidence in this as a solution. In fact, there is indirect evidence on the basis, for instance, of the quantity of deuterium (hydrogen-2) in the Universe, that the overall mass of the Universe and hence, the overall density, can't be much more than we think it is.

Well, then, having carried the "all" as far as we can go, let's turn to the "nothing" portion of the argument. The nearest we can get to nothing is, of course, the subatomic particles.

The mass of the Universe is made up very largely of protons, neutrons and electrons. If there is antimatter, that is made up of antiprotons, antineutrons and antielectrons. There could be a wide variety of other particles, both leptons and hadrons which are formed as a result of energetic events here and there in the Universe.

The energetic particles are so few in number, however, that they don't contribute significantly to the total mass. The electrons are many in number but so light in comparison to protons and neutrons (the mass of 1 proton is equal to that of 1836 electrons and 1 neutron to that of 1838 electrons) that they don't contribute significantly. We have no evidence that anitmatter exists in significant quantities in the Universe, so we can eliminate antiprotons and antineutrons.

In short, we can say that the mass of the Universe is, essentially, the total mass of the protons and neutrons it contains, and we can speak of those protons and neutrons together as "nucleons".

The mass of a single nucleon is equal to 1.66×10^{-24} grams. If the mass of the Universe is 5×10^{53} grams (1/100 the amount required for closing),

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then the total number of nucleons in the Universe is 3×10^{77}. We need a hundred times that many.

Well, then, are there any particles with mass that we've neglected. We've dismissed the electrons, the energetic particles, the antiparticles. What else?

Actually, there are particles present in the Universe in numbers greater than the nucleons, far greater. The catch is that these particles are thought to have zero rest-mass and they do not therefore contribute to the general mass of the Universe, to its overall gravitational field, and to its closing.

These zero-mass particles come in three varieties: gravitons, photons and neutrinos.

Gravitons, the exchange-particles of the gravitational interaction, have not yet been detected. Physicists are certain they exist, however, and will be detected as soon as we can make our detecting devices delicate enough.

Photons, the exchange-particles of the electromagnetic interaction, are very easy to detect. We do it with our eyes, if nothing else.

Being exchange-particles, gravitons and photons both interact readily with matter and are constantly being absorbed and re-emitted. On the other hand, neutrinos, the third of zero-mass particle, are *not* exchange particles and scarcely interact with matter at all. They pass through ourselves, all of Earth, all of the Sun, without a swerve, without any indication of being aware we or it exist. One neutrino out of many trillions may hit an atomic nucleus sufficiently head-on to be absorbed, but no more than that. (However, that's enough to keep them from going utterly unnoticed.)

It is the neutrino, without mass, without electric charge, without interaction with other particles, that is the nearest thing to a nothing-particle we know.

It is to this "nothing" then that we turn for a solution to the mystery of the "all," of the missing mass whose presence or absence will make the difference between an open and a closed Universe, an eternally expanding one or an oscillating one, one in which life exists for virtually zero time or one in which life can arise and arise, again and again, eternally.

And we'll go on with the subject next month.

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Gordon Eklund wrote "The Anaconda's Smile," May 1979 and "Point of Contact," June 1978. His new story is a fascinating novelet about an alternate world in which Europe and much of Asia is controlled by Nazi Germany and North America by the American Indian.

Red Skins

BY

GORDON EKLUND

This morning's date, according to the Christian calendar still widely in use throughout Europe, was April 18, 1945, and John Redburn, after six years residence in England and despite the fact that he was a full-blooded member of the Comanche nation, couldn't help thinking of it in those terms. Maucha Brightman would not have approved. Brightman was a three-quarter blood Iroquois who fervently believed that anything even vaguely European bore the indelible stamp of nihilistic decadence. Redburn waited beside one of the broad rutted boulevards of the Capital of the Eastern Sea for Brightman to complete his morning prayers inside the domed pavilion of the city's Grand Mosque. Redburn wasn't entirely sure that he approved of such worship, but he definitely did not feel it was his place to chide Brightman for falling under the spell of such decadent Old World superstition. Well, Redburn thought sullenly to himself, perhaps now that Hitler has completed his conquest of Russia, he'll ease the immigration restrictions imposed upon the occupied nations and permit a man to return to the country where he best belonged. When Redburn spoke of the country where he belonged, he usually meant England, but lately he knew his feelings had changed. England now meant England under Nazi rule, and Redburn had to admit that, no matter how deeply he missed the cool groves of Cambridge he was much too much of a Comanche ever to thrive beneath Hitler's thumb.

And he often believed he hated Hitler more for that than for all the millions he had slaughtered across Europe, Asia, and Africa.

A sudden, explosive, chugging

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noise interrupted his thoughts. Glancing up, Redburn hastily darted for the side of the road as a bright green steam-driven automobile went thumping past, spewing mud from the sockets of its narrow wheels. Through a cloud of steam, Redburn caught sight of a trio of brightly-garmented Plains chieftains hugging tightly to the bucking seat.

"My God, did you see that?" said an awestricken voice at his elbow.

Redburn turned to discover Maucha Brightman standing open-mouthed beside the road. Together, they stared after the jerking car as it disappeared down the boulevard. "A Polish refugee just opened a rental place over by the river. Those chiefs must be his first customers."

"They can't know how to drive," said Brightman.

"That's why I thought it was a good idea to get out of the way."

"Savage," said Brightman. "Simply savage."

Redburn grinned. "Exactly." The phrase was a private joke the two men shared. In 1937 when both had first arrived at Cambridge, they'd occupied their first few weeks — before the press of studies grew too great — entertaining their fellow students with wild tales of life in the American wilderness. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, that was the response their stories had engendered: "Savage, simply savage." Well, a lot of those stories had been savage — untrue, as well.

Suddenly anxious, Brightman caught Redburn by the arm and steered him down the street. "We'd really better hurry, John. You know how these Nazis are — fanatically punctual. You don't happen to know the time?"

"Sure." Redburn looked at the watch on his wrist, but the crystal had shattered weeks ago and there were no repair shops in Capital City. He glanced surreptitiously at the sun in the sky. "We've got plenty of time."

"Look," said Brightman, who continued to walk very quickly, "maybe I ought to tell you what I can — the basics at least."

"Sure, if you want." Redburn hadn't quite managed to interpret Brightman's unusual agitation. For the past year, Brightman had been negotiating with a succession of Nazis over the contents of a treaty of friendship between the American tribal nations and the Third Reich. If any real snags had developed, Brightman had given no hint of their severity. Last night he had visited Redburn at his home and asked him to join him this morning.

Brightman said, "The key point is something Colonel Werner — that's the man who's heading their present team — brought up yesterday morning. It's a refugee matter, a new one. Some people he claims escaped from the Russian front at the very end of the war."

"And they came here?" Redburn shrugged. "So what's the problem? There must be five thousand European

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refugees within a fifty-mile radius of Capital City." Both men spoke English. The language came as naturally to them as either of their own unrelated native tongues. Redburn also dressed entirely in a European style, including neatly polished black shoes. Brightman compromised: he wore a buckskin jacket above his cotton trousers.

"Colonel Werner knows that," Brightman said, "as well as anyone. These refugees are somehow different. He wants them turned over to him."

Redburn frowned. "And what did you tell him?"

"What he already knew. That every tribal council from the time of the White Massacre has guaranteed free settlement in America to any and all peaceful men and women. That this guarantee is a firm and definite part of our heritage. That I'm merely a representative chosen by the council and that I can in no way violate their decrees. And so on. He wasn't impressed, John. He was adamant."

Redburn shrugged. Nazi demands rarely impressed him. They had become, after six years uninterrupted warfare, too accustomed to having their own way. "If the man won't listen to reason, the man won't listen to reason. Tell him to pack his bags and go home to Berlin. That ought to bring him around."

But Brightman was anxious. "No, John, there's more to this than that."

"Well, what then?"

"I think ... well, I think you probably ought to hear it for yourself. Maybe he's changed his mind — Colonel Werner, I mean. I think we ought to talk to him today."

"Well, you're the negotiator." Redburn was not unwilling to be patient. "You did inform Colonel Werner that I would be sitting in today?"

"Yes, of course. I phoned him this morning. He didn't object. In fact, I think he was pleased."

"That figures." Redburn himself wasn't pleased. He understood that Werner's joy was actually caused by the identity of Redburn's late father who, until the old man's death in 1939, had served as the chairman at every tribal council held during the previous twenty years. The problem was that too many Europeans tended to confuse the respect granted a son with the power possessed by a father. John Redburn exercised no authority over American policy or affairs. At the time of his father's death, he had refused a seat on the tribal council. "I'll just sit there," he told Brightman, "and keep my mouth shut."

"Oh, I don't think that's necessary, John."

"No, but I do."

Their destination, the American government house, was a squat brick building located on a brief knoll overlooking the wide river. At four stories, the council house loomed high over most of the rest of Capital City. It was also one of fewer than a dozen buildings kept regularly heated and lighted

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by the electrical generating facility recently erected — with German engineering — on the opposite bank of the river.

Colonel Werner awaited them in a tiny windowless cubicle tucked away on the second floor. The thick, cloistered atmosphere of the room was far more suitable for a Nazi than any Indian. Redburn assumed Werner had been permitted to select the negotiating room on his own.

Brightman, whose agitation had in no way lessened, said, "Colonel Werner, this is John Redburn, whom I told you about last night."

Werner extended a hand across the narrow table. His formal bearing and stiff manners were so typically Prussian that Redburn would have experienced no surprise if the Colonel had removed a monocle from the pocket of his uniform and inserted it inside the socket of his right eye. "Well, Captain Redburn," said Werner, as the two men shook hands. "Your name is certainly well known to me."

"But it's Herr Redburn, please. My commission, I'm afraid, has expired." What the two men were referring to was the period, shortly after the commencement of the war, when Redburn had flown with the RAF. He had downed a dozen German fighter planes and achieved the reputation of a bit of a hero. Final defeat had washed all that glory away.

"I am nonetheless privileged by your company."

Redburn felt it was time to make his position clear. "I'm here only as an observer. I'm not authorized to take any part in the negotiations and have no power to make decisions."

"I quite understand." Werner smiled faintly and then, with unusual abruptness, removed a thin brown folder from a briefcase and laid it upon the table. "This," he told Brightman, "is the list of names I promised you for today."

Brightman reached out and took the folder and held it open. Past his shoulder, Redburn saw a neatly typed listing of perhaps two dozen names. Hesitantly, Brightman said, "As I told you yesterday, Colonel Werner, there's nothing my people can do in a situation such as this. We sympathize with your interests, but our policy of open immigration can in no way be altered. If these people really are living in America, we still —"

"I guarantee to you that they are." Werner spoke calmly. His hands, palms downward upon the table, lay flat and still. "Two weeks. I am afraid these people must be in our hands by then. I can give no additional time."

"But time isn't —"

"Wait." Redburn, in spite of his best intentions, interrupted. Taking the list from Brightman, he pushed the folder casually across the table. "What Brightman says is accurate, Colonel Werner. I would expect you to know us better. Policies formulated by any tribal council can be rescinded only

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through a vote of a later council. If these people wish to settle in America, that is their right until such time as they violate our laws or traditions. This may not make much sense to you, but it is the way of my people and, rightly or wrongly, ought to be respected by you."

Werner focused his attention fully upon Redburn. He coughed, then smiled tightly. "I fully understand the purposes behind your policy. You gladly permit open settlement of your lands until —" he paused and his smile grew larger "— the numbers grow too large. Then, I believe, you are willing to adopt other means for settling the problem."

Redburn, appalled, struggled to keep his rage from showing. There could be no doubt that Werner was referring to the White Massacre of 1846, when the native tribes of America had risen in unison to hurl out the European invaders who by then had threatened to engulf their lands. The massacre was not an act Redburn cared to justify. Werner was correct in implying that the American open immigration policy dated from the massacre. What Redburn hated was hearing any white man, especially a Nazi like Werner, attempting to use the fact of the massacre for his own ends.

Werner, who must have noticed Redburn's anger, held up a hand. "Please, Mr. Redburn," he said evenly, "I have no desire to remind you of past mistakes. The point I wish to make is that this so-called policy of yours is by no means historically sacred. I have provided you with a listing of twenty-nine known Communist war criminals. My instructions from Berlin state that I am to demand their arrest within two weeks. Because I am aware of the difficulties you face, I am personally willing to grant you an additional two weeks in which to act. However, as an indication of your good faith, I must ask that the first dozen or so criminals be turned over within the original two-week period."

Redburn shook his head ambiguously. Werner's insistence was beginning to puzzle and intrigue him. There was no way of knowing for certain, but he estimated as many as twenty thousand European refugees were presently residing somewhere in America. Until now, the Nazis had never objected in a more than perfunctory manner. Who were these twenty-nine individuals and why were they suddenly so important?

Redburn reached across the table to retrieve the list. As he did, Werner said, "I'm afraid if you refuse to meet my revised terms, war between our nations will be made inevitable."

"War?" Redburn stopped, feeling foolish for uttering such a word aloud. He stared straight into Werner's face but could read nothing there. "You can't be serious?"

"Then your colleague has neglected to inform you? Yes, the demand is necessary. The decision, needless to say,

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is not mine to make. My years in your country have engendered a considerable respect for your people. But war, yes. Unless your cooperation is granted, then such an awful event must occur."

"But you can't fight us," said Redburn. To hide his fear and confusion, he studied the listing. Most of the names meant nothing to him. A majority seemed to be Jewish, but that was hardly surprising. A few of the names, however, struck familiar chords. *Fermi* was one. An Italian scientist? One name he did know well: *Albert Einstein*. "These men aren't Communists. They're scientists."

Werner nodded forcefully, as though he had just scored a crucial point. "Criminal scientists, yes. Creators and perfectors of murderous, terrible weapons. In the final desperate days of the Stalinist state, no weapon was too monstrous to hurl against the advancing German armies. No, Mr. Redburn, these men have committed acts no civilized state can possibly endure."

"But America isn't a civilized state." He regretted his words as soon as he spoke. Such self-depracation had become a natural reaction to European claims of civilized superiority.

Werner got to his feet. "That," he said, "is a matter you must decide for yourselves. For my part, I have performed my function in providing you with a listing. Additional information — descriptions and photographs of the criminals — will be made available to you through the consulate. Until such time as this matter has been settled —" he saluted stiffly "— I must bid you good day."

Redburn kept his chair and said nothing. Brightman sprang to his feet and chased Colonel Werner to the door. "But what about our negotiations? What about the treaty of friendship?"

Werner paused long enough to shrug. "Under the present circumstances, that hardly seems pertinent."

Werner stepped past Brightman and moved curtly out the door.

"Now I know," Redburn said, from the table, "why you wanted me here."

"I just can't believe it," said Brightman. "If that makes me sound stupid, then fine. But I just can't."

"I doubt that France, England, or Russia wanted to believe it at first either. They learned."

"But they're countries. Or they were. We aren't. We don't even have a regular national government. How can we fight a war? How can they fight us? We don't even have an army."

"I expect they intend to find a way." Redburn stood, holding the folder containing the listing in one hand. "I want to make a copy of this. I'll need to ask you to give me one week."

Brightman spread his arms in a gesture of futility. "One week for what, John? We can't turn them over."

"One week to find out exactly why

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these people are so important to Werner. I think, if we find that out, then we'll know what to do next."

"But what can I do? What should I do? I can't keep this a secret."

"Try. Stall Werner. Do anything you can. Tell him — and it's the truth — that we can do nothing without a meeting of the full tribal council. Tell him — and this is true, too — that the chiefs can't possibly be gathered here inside of two weeks."

Brightman nodded slowly. "I'll try. But — but —" he spoke with sudden rapidity "— but then you don't believe that Werner is just bluffing?"

Redburn shook his head. He didn't know why he was so sure, but he was. "He's not bluffing."

As John Redburn approached the home of his friend Sadao Yoshimura, one of only three private dwellings in the city entirely lighted by electricity, he watched the house glimmering on the road ahead of him like several separate pockets of yellow fire. The building itself was wide and long and built totally from heavy pine imported from the Cherokee tribes to the south. The front wall alone contained eight separate windows — each now shined as a separate pocket of light — and a thick, often chaotic garden circled the entire structure. The house stood out here like an unexpected oasis of civilization; only rickety shacks and scrawny huts filled the surrounding terrain. Yoshimura said he preferred to live in this dark, vague section of the city because of a deep love for personal privacy. "These people never interfere in my life, nor I in theirs." Redburn asked about the odor of garbage and sewage, but Yoshimura said, "We had slavery in my country, too. I understand what it can do to a man and his children."

Redburn was expected. His feet barely scraped the porch when Sadao Yoshimura, dressed in a flowing kimono, stepped outside to greet him. Since his return from Europe in 1943, Redburn imagined he'd spent more hours here with Yoshimura than he had in his own home down by the river. Oddly, in spite of their many hours together, Redburn would never have claimed that he and Yoshimura were truly close. It was their mutual alienness rather than any common interest that brought them so often together. "You should have phoned earlier," Yoshimura said. His telephone was one of fewer than fifty in the city. "I would have held dinner."

"No, I've eaten."

"Wine, then? Sake? European whisky?"

"Wine."

After Yoshimura filled two glasses with a red Burgandy that dated back to before the occupation, the two men sat on the floor on opposite sides of a squat glass table. Many times, in each other's company, Redburn and Yoshimura might sit comfortably beside this table throughout an entire evening

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without once exchanging a single word. Tonight, however, Redburn had come for a special reason. He felt the pressing weight of Colonel Werner's listing in the inner pocket of his suit coat: "Sadao," he said, after a tentative sip of wine, "do you know where Einstein is hiding?"

Yoshimura looked up and slowly smiled. Like most times when he did this, the exact meaning behind the gesture remained unclear. "Albert Einstein," he said softly. "The creator of the special and general theories of relativity."

"Yes, him."

"A brilliant man who, even in Japan, is most highly regarded."

"I see." Redburn faced his smiling host patiently. He might have described Sadao Yoshimura as the most devious human being he had ever known, except that the word *devious* carried too negative a connotation to express his true feelings. Indirect, nonpositive, ambiguous, shifting. Yoshimura rarely uttered a direct lie, but he seldom spoke the whole truth either.

"Yes, he is here." Yoshimura lightly brushed the wooden floor with the palm of his hand. "In America."

"Yes, I've heard that." Redburn used his wine as a means of pacing the conversation. He spoke, then sipped, then spoke, then sipped. "The Nazis know. They want him — him and several others. They want them very badly."

"Refuse," said Yoshimura.

"And if we dare not?"

"But you must. Einstein is the most significant individual of our era. His presence is an honor to you."

"The Nazis are your allies. Remember?"

Yoshimura frowned. Whenever Redburn chose to remind him of the Berlin-Tokyo axis, his expression altered significantly. A look of pain entered his eyes, as though he had been suddenly reminded of the anguish required of a human being in order to survive in the world as it was presently ordered. "But not friends. If they could, they would destroy us utterly. We would destroy them. As a soldier serving in Burma, I once witnessed a most disturbing sight. A great bull elephant went suddenly mad and totally destroyed a native village. I saw dozens of men — good and bad — trampled beneath the oblivious, uncaring feet of the beast."

"Are you comparing Hitler to a rogue elephant?"

"Not Hitler, no. Germany. Einstein is also a German."

Redburn decided that Yoshimura's candor deserved an equally honest reply. "Today in a negotiating session attended by Maucha Brightman and myself, Colonel Werner threatened to declare war on the Indian nations unless we turned Einstein and twenty-eight other scientists over to him inside of a month."

Redburn anticipated some expression of shock, but Yoshimura merely

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smiled. "He spoke the truth. The order is derived from Hitler himself."

"Then we have no choice."

"You will not fight the Germans."

"We will try. Our strength is like the ocean. We can be hit but never destroyed. When they attack, we recede. When they stop, we attack."

"The Communist armies in China attempted to deploy similar tactics against our imperial armies. They were beaten."

"They fought from a theory. We fight from our souls. We are Indians. For hundreds of years we have kept our lands free."

"You have fought no one for nearly one hundred years."

"We haven't changed."

"But the process of warfare has. I know, John—I'm a soldier. If you attempt to hide from the Germans, they will come and burn every stick of timber in the great American forest until you have no place left to hide. They will slaughter your women, children, and old men. It will be a costly war for them, I am sure—even more costly than the Russian campaign—and I doubt that they wish to attempt it quite yet. In time, however, they must come. The prize—two vast untapped continents—is too immense."

"You seem to be saying we should abandon our principles and let Hitler have Einstein and the others."

"From your point of view, I would say that is most wise." Yoshimura reached out to refill the wine glasses. He had served, at fifty-four, as Japan's chief consular officer in Capital City since 1941. Before that, in Burma, Australia, and China, he had headed imperial armies. His reputation as a soldier was one of cold, cautious, merciless warfare.

Redburn said, "Any decision will have to be reached by the full vote of a tribal council. What I'm trying to find out is why the Nazis want these men, what their exact intentions are. Do they intend to execute them, for instance? I doubt the chiefs would ever approve that."

"The Germans will not kill them. Their purposes are different from that."

"What?"

Yoshimura shook his head. "If I knew that, I would know everything, but no one will speak freely of the matter—not the Nazis or the others, the scientists. It has something to do with something discovered in Russia by the advancing Germans during their final drive through the central portions of that nation. A project—a secret scientific project—and these refugees were involved. What I fail to understand is your personal involvement in this matter. I thought you had long since rejected a place among your tribal council."

Redburn explained how and why he had become involved in the situation. "Unlike nearly all my countrymen, I know something firsthand of modern warfare. Not that I'm not con-

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fident we could win—I am, and we could. But I don't care to see it happen. Not here. It would be like Satan invading paradise. This is too beautiful a country. It means too much to me."

"Then why do you choose not to live in it?" Yoshimura asked.

Redburn opened his mouth angrily to explain his reasons for preferring to live in Capital City rather than the open—and beautiful—countryside, but before he could utter a word, a sudden loud crashing noise erupted from behind. Swiveling on his heels, he saw three men in conservative European attire come bursting through the narrow doorway. The men were white, and each held a revolver in a clenched fist. The barrels of all three weapons were aimed at Redburn's middle.

Halfway to his feet, he froze, then stood more slowly. None of the intruders seemed familiar to him. He thought for sure they were Germans.

Yoshimura stood with his arms folded firmly across his chest. "You have entered my home in violation of international law." There could be no doubt that he too believed these men to be Germans.

"Be silent," said the middle of the three men, thin, with short gray hair. Jerking his gun toward the darkened rear portions of the house, he ordered his men: "Search back there—and hurry."

The other two men raced past Redburn and Yoshimura to the back.

Yoshimura refused to watch them pass. He told the remaining man, "You must explain the purposes behind this invasion." He was no longer smiling.

The German seemed agreeable. "We have reason to believe you are sheltering a wanted criminal in your home."

Yoshimura shrugged. "And what if I am? As a consular officer, I have the right to grant asylum."

The German didn't respond. Redburn heard a distant shout, then a clatter. A moment later, a gunshot followed.

No one said a word.

Then the two men reappeared from the back. Between them they supported a third man. He seemed unhurt but very frightened—a short, wiry man with pale skin and dark eyes. Redburn didn't know who the man might be. It wasn't Albert Einstein—it might have been any of the others.

Yoshimura acted as calmly as ever. He approached the German unthreateningly. "If you attempt to remove this man from my house, you must answer personally for the consequences." Despite the politeness of his words, there was power in his tone.

The German showed some uncertainty. "I have my orders, sir."

"Illegal orders.

"They come from the highest levels of authority in Berlin." The sound of that magic capital seemed to bring renewed confidence to the man "Such orders cannot be disputed."

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"Then you have seen them?" said Yoshimura.

"Why, no, but Colonel Werner—but I..."

Yoshimura shook his head sadly. "It is you who will bear the responsibility for this act."

The prisoner was trying to speak now, too. His words came out slowly, in halting half-whispers. Redburn thought the language he was speaking must be German, but it was difficult to tell for certain.

One of the two Germans holding the prisoner gave an irritated grunt and suddenly struck the man solidly in the stomach. It wasn't a brutal blow—just a firm one.

The prisoner gagged and whimpered and fell silent.

"Take him outside," the leader said. He had overcome his hesitancy now. The barrel of his gun focused firmly upon Yoshimura. "Don't anyone move one inch till we're gone."

The two men carried their half-conscious prisoner through the door. He whimpered gently but no longer attempted to speak.

"I apologize once more for the intrusion." His nerve back, the German gave a cocky salute. "Perhaps we will meet again."

His gun pointed at Yoshimura, the German backed quickly through the door.

Alone with Yoshimura, Redburn said, "I assume that was one of the refugee scientists."

Yoshimura said, "Yes." He moved toward the door without looking back. "A brilliant Polish physicist. A dreadful shame this must happen." Reaching inside the folds of his kimono, he drew out a long-barreled gun.

Shocked, Redburn went after him. "But you don't intend—"

"Hush." Yoshimura reached through the open doorway and touched a switch upon the outer wall of the house. All at once, the entire front yard, a loose expanse of rocks and low shrubbery, erupted in bright light.

In the distance, perhaps twenty feet from the porch, Redburn saw four men suddenly staggering.

Yoshimura, apparently unaffected by the blinding light, raised his weapon. He fired twice.

In the yard, two of the four figures fell sprawling. Redburn thought one might be the prisoner.

Yoshimura moved his hand slightly and fired twice more.

Now there were four bodies in the yard.

Redburn cried out and then rushed past Yoshimura and into the yard. He approached the bodies and examined all four without finding any traces of life.

At last Yoshimura stood beside him. Redburn, shaking, pointed to the men lying at his feet. "You killed them—all of them—all four." He pointed to the twisted body of the prisoner. "And him, too. By—by accident."

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"No." Yoshimura bent down and felt the pulse of the scientist. "I did not err. It was necessary to kill this man before the others in the event one of my other shots failed. And he lacked courage—you saw that."

Redburn had seen everything and yet he did not know what to say. This callous brutality—he suddenly understood exactly what sort of soldier Yoshimura had been. "Then you must know what all of this is about."

"I know only what I have told you."

"But you were willing to kill an innocent man."

"No man is ever that—not even you Indians." Yoshimura turned back toward the house. His gun dangled limply in a hand.

Redburn hurried after him.

In the open doorway, Yoshimura paused. His hand moved and the bright lights in the yard went dark. He laid a hand upon Redburn's shoulder. "I must make private amends for what I have done. There is shame. Please forgive me. I have been a poor host."

Redburn felt his mind racing in mad confusion. "But can't you at least tell me why—"

The hand squeezed firmly. "There is nothing I can say, John."

Yoshimura stepped back and the door closed softly, like a muted whisper.

Alone in the darkness, Redburn turned toward home. Crossing the yard, he took care to avoid the bodies. The gunshots, he knew, must have carried through the silent night like roaring thunder. As he passed the nearby shacks, he could see dark, curious faces peering at him from within. No one came out. No one spoke a word to him.

Two hours after arriving home, a knock at his own door startled him. Carrying a flickering lantern, Redburn went to see. A tiny Japanese boy in short pants stood upon the doorstep. Silently, the boy handed Redburn a folded note. When he held it up to the light, he found only a single name printed in a neat, constricted hand: *Hannah Weintraub.*

He shook his head. The name meant nothing to him.

When he looked up to ask the boy if the note had been sent by Yoshimura and, if so, what it might mean, he discovered to his surprise that he was alone once again.

On swift, silent feet, the boy had fled into the night.

As John Redburn waited in the stillness of early morning outside the Grand Mosque, he studied the faces of the parishioners as they moved in and out past him. Most, of course, were black men, and only a few—largely the occasional European—wore anything finer than the coarsest homespun rags. For a variety of reasons, the Grand Mosque was nearly always crowded. The number of Islamic worshippers in

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Capital City probably exceeded the total found in the whole rest of the American continent. In 1219 A.D.—the Christian calendar again—the Arab navigator al-Malik had touched land not thirty miles south of here. Paradoxically, the religion he had brought with him to the western continent had perservered even while his own people had grown bored with futile attempts at colonization and soon vanished. When the first European settlers had arrived at the beginning of the eighteenth century and brought their African slave laborers with them, Islam had prospered among those black men and women who found it more directly appealing than the Protestant Christianity of their masters. Redburn knew few details one way or the other. As a young student in Europe, he had pleased his contemporaries by proclaiming a casual sort of atheism. Lately, religion had intervened in his life not at all. Maucha Brightman, who had acquired his beliefs from Arabic ancestors, was quietly devout. The two men seldom spoke of the subject. Redburn saw no earthly reason for a man to prostrate himself five times daily and pray to a deity that he could never actually see. He knew Islam held out the promise of paradise after death. Perhaps, for some, that was a significant commodity. He wouldn't argue with that. Neither would he believe.

Unable to sleep last night, he had left home just past dawn but even then missed catching Brightman at home. It bothered him, standing out in the open this way. An anxious tickling irritated his neck. He tried to shrug the feeling away. This was his city, after all—his home. But the Germans might be anywhere. He couldn't avoid wondering: just how far were they willing to go to attain what they wanted? They'd already shown no compunctions about breaking into the home of a supposed rival. Would even murder and assassination prove too drastic a means for them?

At last, gazing up the high steps, he saw Maucha Brightman hurrying downward toward him. He waited until the other man came within shouting distance, then called out, "Maucha, wait! I want to talk to you!"

"John!" Brightman stopped where he was. He seemed not only surprised but almost frightened. He hurried forward. "What are you doing here?"

"I want to talk to you. Ask you some things."

Brightman swiveled his head fearfully. "Not here."

"Well, anywhere you want."

"Then come on." Brightman hurried Redburn the remainder of the way down the steps. At the edge of the broad dusty avenue, he stopped and looked both ways. He seemed extremely agitated, unable to decide.

Redburn tried to help. "Your home, Maucha?"

"Yes. If that's what you want. Sure. But let's hurry."

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The two men set off in the direction of Maucha Brightman's home on the outskirts of the city.

There were few people about this early in the morning. An apple merchant from the south, a wizened mulatto, rode past upon a horse-drawn wagon. Redburn said, "Is it all right if we talk now? I'm in a hurry."

Brightman appeared on the verge of unburdening himself of whatever was bothering him but then seemed to think better of it. "Sure, John. I'll help anyway I can."

"Then tell me who this is." Redburn handed Brightman the slip of paper the Japanese boy had brought him last night.

"Hannah—" said Brightman in apparent surprise. He fell silent and his eyes grew wide. "What do you know about her? Is she involved in this, too?" His voice had dipped to a whisper. He kept glancing behind, acting uneasy.

"That's what I hoped you could tell me. Apparently, whoever she is, she's involved in this whole matter of the refugee scientists. I'd hoped, since you seem to know everything and everyone in the city, the name might mean something to you."

"Well, it does but—" Taking Redburn's arm, Brightman drew very close. They walked in the center of the street, far away from the few other pedestrians. "She's supposed to be—what do they call it?—she's a Zionist. A Zionist agent. One who believes the Jews should be allowed to have a country of their own in Palestine. She's British. After the occupation, she supposedly came here. The Nazis think so. They hate her. They believe she engineered the murder of Goering and the kidnapping of Hess."

"From Capital City?"

"That's what they say. Colonel Werner would froth if you even mentioned her name. What's really strange is that they don't even know who she is, what she really looks like. Hannah Weintraub probably isn't her real name. Twice in England the Nazis thought they'd killed her. Both times, a few days later, she showed up again."

"I see," said Redburn. But he didn't —not entirely. If this mysterious woman was so impossible to track down, how was her name supposed to help him? Did Yoshimura know who she was or where? If so, why hadn't he divulged that along with her name? What possible connection could she have with the twenty-nine, no, he corrected himself, twenty-eight-scientists?

Brightman was acting nervously again. "Was she there with you last night, John?"

Redburn couldn't help being surprised. "What do you know about last night?"

"I—I saw it."

"You did? You mean Yoshimura showed you?

"Yoshimura? No—no, of course not. Colonel Werner did."

"Colonel Werner?" Redburn took

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his friend by the arm. "Maybe you'd better explain exactly what it is you do know about last night."

"I know about the bodies. The dead men. I know that you—that they say you killed them."

"Me?" The idea was so incredible Redburn had to resist an impulse to laugh. "But that's ridiculous."

Brightman didn't seem to agree. He spoke hesitantly. "But you were in the war. You killed people there."

"But that was different. It was... long distance killing. I was there last night, yes. I went to see Yoshimura to seek his advice. While I was there, three Germans broke in. I didn't have any idea till then that Yoshimura was concealing one of the scientists in his home. The Germans took the man away."

"Then he must have been the other one. The fourth man. Colonel Werner wouldn't say who he was. He just looked angry when I thought he was a German, too."

"And Werner told you I killed them? He must have been having a little joke." Redburn shook his head. "But what did Yoshimura say? Surely he must have told you what really happened."

"I didn't talk to him."

"He wasn't there?"

"He was there, yes, but he wouldn't come out. Colonel Werner said he was in a state of shock."

"I think Colonel Werner is probably the last man in the world ever to know what's going on inside Sadao Yoshimura's head." What actually disturbed Redburn most was Brightman's reaction. His friend had really believed him to be guilty of four cold-blooded murders. "Didn't Colonel Werner bother to give you any reason for my killing all these people?"

"He said you must be a fanatic — an anti-German fanatic. He said you'd learned to kill during the war and now you couldn't stop. He said you were trying to insure that war did come between our peoples, because that's what you'd wanted all along."

Redburn stopped in the middle of the street and took hold of Brightman's arm. "None of that's true, Maucha, not one word of it."

"I know that now, John." His voice lacked sincerity. Even now, Redburn did not think he was wholly convinced. "But he did force me to promise to convene a tribal council. The word went out last night — along the telephone lines where possible. Colonel Werner is sending airplanes to pick up all the chiefs. I'm sorry, but it really is their decision to make."

"I still wish you hadn't done it." Nothing would be served by objecting more strongly.

"But you can still go on with your investigations. There's no reason for you to stop. The chiefs will want to know as much as possible. Sundance has already asked what you think. I spoke to him last night on the phone." Sundance, Redburn's Uncle, served as

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the Comanche's representative on the council.

"No, I'm finished — through. There's something very final about the convening of a council. In my father's time, they were held only at ripe times — when all the signs pointed to a beneficial result. Now we hold them whenever the Germans tell us, too."

"That's not fair, John."

Maybe it wasn't, he decided, but it was true. "Yoshimura did tell me one thing last night and maybe it will help. He said, no matter what, we shouldn't turn the refugees over to the Germans. He said they wouldn't kill them. He said it would be worse."

"Worse?"

"That's what he said." Redburn turned away. "I'm going home. If Colonel Werner — if anyone wants me, you can tell them where I'll be."

"Sure, John, and I'll explain to Colonel Werner, too. About what really did happen last night."

"Yes, I'd appreciate that." As Redburn went away, he realized that he had never actually told Brightman the truth, that Yoshimura had done all the killing. Would he have believed me if I had? Redburn wondered. And he also realized that he no longer very much cared.

The streets had become more crowded now. Wagons filled with goods and produce rolled past, scattering dust. A steam car huffed down the center of the boulevard. Redburn, his head turned down, moved purposively.

When he opened the unlocked front door of his home he saw at once a woman lying half-sprawled on the living room couch. He had never seen her before, and she was not pretty. Her eyes and hair were dark and she had wide, fleshy lips that failed to conceal a mouthful of big, crooked teeth. Her body was too full at the hips, too flat at the chest, and stout and stumpy in the thighs and legs. She wore a baggy cotton dress that concealed any closer knowledge of her true form.

The woman held a gun in her hand. She pointed the barrel menacingly at his chest. "Please do come in, Mr. Redburn."

Stepping inside, Redburn shut the front door softly. He made what wasn't really that wild a guess: "You're Hannah Weintraub."

Her face registered surprise, shock, and anger. "How do you know about me?"

He approached cautiously. "Yoshimura told me your name."

She forced any hint of emotion off her face and wore a cold, unfeeling mask. "That's good."

She didn't lower the gun.

Shifting his seat on the floor in hopeless discomfort, John Redburn decided it was time to take another stab at being civilized. He looked at the woman who sat silently above him and said, "Are you still sure the gun's really necessary?" Hours had passed since his return home. The sun, past the drawn

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front curtains, seemed to stand high in the sky. "You might hurt your hand gripping it so hard."

Smiling grimly, Hannah Weintraub shook her head.

"What's wrong? Don't you trust me?"

She said, "No."

"You ought to."

"Oh?" She lifted a tentative, mocking eyebrow. "Why?"

He wasn't sure he could answer that, but at least she was responding now. In their hours together until now, he hadn't managed to pry more than a dozen words out of her. This marked her first question. Otherwise, she'd informed him only that, come nightfall, they'd be leaving here and going somewhere else. Where? He'd asked, and she'd said nothing.

He felt the time had come to try to reason with her. Leaning casually forward, his fists balanced on the hard wooden floor, he said, "Hannah, the point ought to be that you and I belong to the same side. We want the same results and hate the same enemies. If we can't work together, how can we expect to win?"

She shrugged. "I'm not convinced we are on the same side."

He suppressed a smile. A victory of sorts had been achieved. He had succeeded at last in drawing her out, forcing a conversation. "I hate the Germans and everything they stand for."

"Oh, do you?" She started to mock him but then, apparently thinking better of it, shrugged again. "Well, maybe so." She spoke thoughtfully, considering each word individually before uttering it aloud. "But it's not the same. You see, if the Germans ever caught me, I'd be dead. Not that they'd kill me — though they'd surely do that — but because I'd already be dead the instant I fell into their hands. And not because I'm Hannah Weintraub, the Zionist agent. Not who I am, but what. I am Jewish. The Germans murdered my mother and father, my brothers and sisters and friends. None of them were Zionists. They weren't agents. They were Jewish."

"I've heard stories about the extermination of the Jews."

She smiled. "They're not stories. I've seen it. The death camps. When the Nazis conquered Europe, they arrested every Jewish person. In 1942, when the war in Russia went bad, Hitler ordered the systematic extermination of every non-essential Jew in the camps. Millions have died. Their methods are incredible. It's like a steel mill — an assembly line plant — only the result is death. In another few years, there won't be a Jew left alive in Europe. I understand they intend to turn to the native Africans next. Unless, that is, they manage to conquer America first."

"That isn't very likely," he said drily.

She met his gaze firmly, mockingly. "It isn't?"

"No."

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"Then that's how you and I differ. I'm prepared to devote my whole life to exacting revenge from those monsters for what they have done to my people. You're not. You want to protect yourself and your people. You haven't been wounded yet. You haven't been hurt."

"And I haven't been convinced, either. Look, I lived in Europe. I'm not a common ordinary American savage. I flew in the RAF. The Germans are a civilized people. Even if Hitler is a madman, his people won't —"

She laughed bitterly and swayed toward him. "But they have, you idiot. I told you I'd seen it and I have. With these." She touched her face. "With my own eyes. You act as if I've built up some incredible fantasy that I want to foist off on fools like you. Believe me, if I wanted to create a fantasy, it wouldn't be for —"

He saw this as his best opportunity and sprang. Caught up totally in the passion of her words, Hannah Weintraub barely recalled his presence in the room. Redburn leaped from the balls of his feet and landed squarely in front of her. His hands lashed out, and the gun went flying. He put his other hand around her mouth and smothered the involuntary scream she tried to let loose. His knee pressed tight against her stomach. She squirmed and fought against him. He wouldn't budge an inch.

"Shut up," he said. "Don't yell."

He felt her relax in surrender.

He let her go. It was a risk, but he felt it had to be taken. Moving calmly away, he picked up the gun where it had fallen and balanced the butt in his palm.

Then he carried the gun over to her and held out his hand. "Here — take it."

She stared unbelievingly at the offering.

"No, I'm serious — take it."

She accepted the weapon. She didn't turn it on him but tucked it away in the folds of her dress. "How do I know this isn't all some elaborate facade?" she asked.

"I guess you don't." He sat on the floor again at her feet. "But you don't have to point that gun at me either."

"All right — I'm sorry." She gazed at him coldly. "So what is it you want?"

"Your help. That's all. The same thing I assume you want from me — just help. And you can start by telling me where we're going tonight and why we have to wait until dark to go there."

Briefly, for a final time, she seemed to consider his sincerity. Then, with yet another shrug, she said, "The reason why is that we're not alone. At least two Germans have been following you around all morning. A couple more are hiding outside in the brush. I had to slip past them to get in here. Sneaking away unseen will be easier after dark."

He wouldn't doubt that — or that she was correct when she said the Ger-

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mans were watching. "You mean they expected this contact?"

"They must have expected something. You're an important man. They know that but so do we."

"That still doesn't tell me where."

She considered, rubbing the plump flesh of her chin. "South. To a place there. A farmhouse. I don't want to go into any further details in case something happens. One of the scientists will be there. We realize we made a mistake bringing one of them to Yoshimura. We'll do it the other way around this time. Bring you to him."

"Then you know where all the scientists are hiding? All twenty-eight?"

"I do. We were the ones who got them into the country." She shook her head firmly. "But don't think you'll ever make me talk. I've withstood worse torture than you could ever imagine."

He believed that was true. Standing, he figured their game of feint-and-weave to be over. "Let me fix us something to eat."

She nodded and stood with him, as if to help. "What do you have?"

"Bacon and eggs. It's fresh. The family across the creek trades with me."

Something made her laugh. Reaching out, she touched his chin, a strangely intimate gesture that made her seem, at least for a time, not unpretty at all. "Eggs will be fine, but I think you'd better skip the bacon. I thought you said you'd lived in Europe"

"I did live there." He felt a flash of anger. Why was she doubting him now?

She smiled reassuringly. "I know you did. Cambridge, wasn't it?"

He nodded.

She shook her head sadly. "Hell, even there, you still ought to know better."

John Redburn had set the lantern burning to prevent the encroaching darkness from blanketing the interior of the house and also to show the Germans waiting outside that everything was really quite normal within.

Hannah Weintraub had suggested doing that, and Redburn had agreed.

Now Hannah stood close to the living room window, with only the tip of her nose and the corner of one eye protruding stealthily past the edge of the drawn curtains. "I think I can see them moving out there," she told him softly, without moving. "I can't count how many but they're clumsy, which means they're confident, and that can't help but work to our advantage."

"You sound confident, too," he said.

"But I have a reason."

"We could go out the back," he suggested. "That would be safer."

"Not necessarily." She drew away from the window, letting the curtain fall naturally. "That's where they'll be expecting something. They're weakest where they're actually strongest. We'll

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go out the front."

He shrugged. Hannah was the secret agent, not he. Redburn was willing for the moment to follow her directions. "I guess that makes sense."

"You bet it does. Here." She reached into the folds of her dress. "For you." She tossed him a gun.

Redburn checked the weapon over. It wasn't the same gun Hannah had pointed at him earlier — she held that one in her hand. "I'm not an expert with these," he admitted.

"You point it, then squeeze the trigger. Don't tug or jerk — just squeeze. Even if you miss, the noise will scare them."

"The Nazis?"

She shrugged. "They're human, too. You better wait at the door."

He followed her directions, clutching the knob. "The lantern?"

She stood beside the flickering light. "I'll get it."

"Won't that warn them something's going to happen?"

"Maybe. It can't be helped. With the light behind us, they'd have us in an instant."

"I guess you're right." He didn't feel especially anxious. Something in her confidence had spread over and infected him, too. He knew this could be dangerous but it felt more like two proper English children playing a game of Indian savages. Last night, at Yoshimura's house, that had been a serious thing. Tonight, his own home, his own world, surrounded him. It was a safe place. No one could die.

He waited at the door, with the gun heavy in his free hand. He heard a whoosh of air and then darkness followed. He turned the door knob cautiously. The door opened without a sound.

She pushed him gently forward. "Don't hesitate." Her voice was a whisper. "Hurry — on tiptoes."

Redburn moved swiftly across the porch. The night was dark and clear. No moon but a sparkling blanket of stars. Hannah went around him, then gripped his hand and led the way. He felt with his feet. The porch disappeared and he stepped upon dry ground. An open cleared area some twenty feet wide encircled the house. After that came a thicket of bushes and short trees. The Germans would be there. Hannah said she had a car concealed beyond that.

They had crossed the clearing about halfway when Redburn first heard a shout. He didn't understand a word because the language was a foreign one. It was German. The voice seemed to come from only a few feet away.

Redburn froze. He felt Hannah's tight grip.

A second voice, slightly farther away and to the left, also shouted.

The first voice replied.

Then Hannah fired. Redburn saw the flash of light, then heard the roar of thunder. The familiar odor of gunpowder stung his nostrils. A voice scream-

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ed — a nearby voice. He heard a falling thud.

"Got him," said Hannah, very softly. She tugged. "Move faster now."

They almost ran. He held his gun high, ready to fire. This was serious now, no longer a game. One man might already have died. From ahead, a burst of flame erupted. Redburn threw himself flat on the ground. He felt a whistling blast of air. The bullet? It had missed him by inches.

Hannah put an arm around Redburn's back and drew him close to where she lay. He squinted into the night ahead and blinked rapidly in hopes of piercing the darkness. He could see the dark silhouettes of the surrounding underbrush but no people. The Germans were there somewhere.

A pounding set of footsteps rushed toward him. It seemed close, a few feet distant. He fired only at the sound. Squeezing the trigger, he felt nothing.

Then an invisible man screamed. He whimpered and fell.

Hannah gave a shriek of delight. "You did it. You got him. You said you couldn't shoot."

"I said I couldn't do it very well."

They were on their feet. They ran. Hannah thought at least four Germans were watching the house. So far, they had met three and shot two. They were hardly safe. The low bushes tore at their clothes. Hannah, turning wildly, fired behind. Redburn sought to use his ears. Against the pounding of his own footsteps and Hannah's, he picked out a third pair of running feet. These seemed to be moving stealthily in a quick, brief circle. Redburn realized the man was trying to intercept them. He let Hannah continue to shoot. The footsteps ran even with his for a time, then drew ahead.

He waited until the footsteps stopped on the path ahead, then raised his gun and fired at the point where he had last heard them moving. It was a wild shot in the dark but was answered by an immediate scream. Hannah leaped over the body and he followed after. Beneath, he caught a quick, vague glimpse of a tall man in a dark uniform who did not seem to be moving.

"I think we're going to make it," Hannah cried.

"Maybe." He was listening. Were there others? He heard nothing from behind.

The car lay just outside the ring of bushes. He had anticipated something primitive and steam-driven, but this was the latest European gasoline car, with four doors and plush seats. Hannah took the wheel and Redburn, in the rear, lowered both windows and thrust his gun into the night.

Still, nothing. The engine grinded, refusing to ignite. Hannah labored the gas pedal. Redburn felt the cool leather upholstery against his damp back muscles.

The engine finally started. Hannah released the brake and spun swiftly into the night. She seemed to know ex-

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actly where she was going, even without the assistance of head or tail lights. Redburn rolled up the windows. It was cold. He let his hands fall and the gun dangled between his knees.

"We made it!" Hannah was saying. "Damn it, Redburn, you were magnificent!"

He didn't want her compliments. The terrain they were passing seemed familiar to him, an intimate collection of stick houses and smooth streets. The Cherokee enclave, he remembered. A peaceful land.

"Hannah," he said, "that was a damned cheap trick you pulled."

She actually seemed surprised. Her head jerked back and her big eyes stared in wonder. She had switched on the lights at some moment. He could see her clearly. "What do you mean, John?"

"I mean the way you set this up and the way I let you. We went out of that house the most obvious way possible. The Germans couldn't help seeing us and they did. They saw you, and they saw me. They saw us together."

"But they don't know who I am. Nobody does. Except you."

She was trying to be kind, but he wasn't stupid. "I think they'll manage to guess," he said drily. "There can't be that many women in America who are cold-blooded killers. We Indians are savages and so expect our women to be demur."

"I know how you treat your women," she said.

"I doubt that. I doubt anything you say." He felt soiled and used and the bitterness would not stay out of his voice. "Whether they recognized you or not, the Germans saw me. They saw me kill two of their own men."

"They saw you last night, too, didn't they?" The back of her head faced him. She seemed to be studying the road ahead.

"That wasn't me. That was Yoshimura and I imagine they know it. Tonight, it was me."

Her voice remained calm. "And you really think I planned this whole thing intentionally just to get you — what? — to get you involved."

"Yes, I believe that."

"And you're angry? You're damned upset at me?" Their relationship had come full circle in a matter of a few hours. Hannah was mocking him again.

"I am upset," he said firmly.

"Then wait." A note of passion — fervor — crept into her tone.

"What?" he lifted his head, puzzled.

"I said wait. Until after you've talked to Peter Lijinski."

"Who?" He still didn't understand.

"Peter Lijinski. Our scientist. The man I'm taking you to see. Wait until after you've talked to him, then come see me again." She turned around now, letting him see her face fully, and there was absolutely nothing mocking in her expression. "I think you may have changed your mind."

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He shrugged. She was only being mysterious. "All right, I'll do that," he said stiffly.

"Fine." Hannah faced front again.

The remainder of their ride, two bumpy hours upon rough south country terrain, passed in mutual silence.

Ahead, twin bonfires glowed like angel's eyes gleaming in the night. The car bucked and weaved down the last few yards of rutted roadway. John Redburn knew this land only through rumor. It was said to be a wild country, populated by the sons and daughters of former slaves who now ran free and wild like the savage warriors of their native Africa. Redburn had, however, so far seen nothing more sinister than a few battered farmhouses. But it was late — and very dark — and the auto headlights penetrated only a few yards beyond the edge of the wide road.

Hannah braked between the bonfires. Redburn identified the shape of a log cabin squatting between the tall orange flames.

Hannah said, "This is the place. Get out."

Redburn said, "All right."

These were the first words they had exchanged in hours.

He saw dark figures looming in the night. Eight, ten, perhaps more — all seemed to be men. One figure broke away from the edge of the fire and approached. He was a short man, white, with a dark beard and fierce sunken eyes.

Lifting a hand to his forehead, the man gave a military salute.

Hannah returned the gesture. She said, "Benjamin."

"Hannah." Benjamin came closer and stared at Redburn as if he were a specimen under laboratory examination. "Is this the one you wanted?"

"The American, yes. His name is John Redburn."

Benjamin grunted. Apparently satisfied, he stepped back. "Lijinski is moping inside. He claims he's shaken up about the other one getting killed."

"They were close friends from boyhood," Hannah said.

"I had some of those once myself," said Benjamin. He was armed. Redburn saw twin pistols straped to his waist in a leather holster. Benjamin also clutched a rifle in his left hand. The other men, dressed in dark clothes, seemed similarly armed. Redburn couldn't help wondering: what could this be? A secret foreign army hidden in his own country. How much of the world had he neglected during these last few years of withdrawal?

Hannah waved at him to follow her and Benjamin toward the cabin. Redburn walked behind them. Hannah and Benjamin leaned closely together, whispering too softly for Redburn to overhear. The other men appeared oblivious. Redburn watched them moving silently back and forth between the fires.

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At the cabin door, Benjamin knocked sharply. The man who answered was an aging black man with a round, lined face. Seeing Benjamin, he nodded, then stepped outside. Benjamin, Hannah, and Redburn entered the cabin. The door shut softly behind them.

The cabin had only the one room. It was furnished with a round table and two chairs. A thin, young, frail man with bushy red hair sat with his elbows resting upon the table. He didn't look up until Benjamin stepped over beside him.

"Dr. Lijinsky," Benjamin said, in a warmer tone than he had so far shown, "this is the Indian we told you about, John Redfern."

"Who?" said Peter Lijinski.

"John Redburn," said Redburn.

"A very important Indian," Benjamin went on. "His father was the chief of all the American tribes, and his uncle is very influential now. We wanted you to describe the project to him so that he can decide if he wants to help us. We have to trust his people now because they're the only ones who can protect us from the Nazis."

"Yes, I understand," Lijinski said. "I'll tell him."

Redburn moved boldly forward. He had been pushed around all day by these people—by Hannah—and last night by Yoshimura. He felt it was time to exert a little authority of his own. "I don't want to talk to this man," he told Benjamin. "I won't listen to one word. Not unless you—you and Hannah—get out and leave us alone. I want to hear the truth. Not your truth—his." He pointed to Lijinski, who did not seem to be listening.

Benjamin started to protest, but Hannah intervened. "I was just going to suggest that myself," she said.

Benjamin still seemed unconvinced. "We can't trust him."

Hannah shrugged. "I thought you just got through telling Dr. Lijinski that we had to trust him."

Redburn said, "It has to be the way I described. Otherwise, I won't listen to a word. I'm not bluffing."

Benjamin thought for a moment, chewing a lip, then nodded sharply and turned toward the door. Hannah went with him, but Benjamin paused and waved a finger at Redburn. "There's eleven of us outside. You saw my men and you know we're serious. Anything you try—I don't care what—and we'll be ready."

Redburn nodded to show that he had heard. He didn't understand the importance of the threat but being able to make it seemed to satisfy Benjamin. He went out.

Hannah, at the door, paused and silently mouthed, "Later." Redburn remembered what it meant. Hannah was reminding him of her promise that this conversation would be important. He couldn't share her confidence. Peter Lijinski, a well-known physicist if Redburn recalled correctly, failed to inspire much faith. He continued to sit

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with his head in his hands. He stared at the blank tabletop.

Redburn sat down in the unoccupied chair. He spoke softly so that even a person with his ear fixed to the door would not possibly overhear. "Doctor, why don't you just tell me what this is all about? Start at the beginning, if there is one, and explain everything. I assume you are aware of our present circumstances. You know why I'm here. The Germans want you and your colleagues placed in their hands and they've threatened war with America if we fail to meet their demands. I don't believe they're bluffing."

"They aren't," Lijinski said, definitely, firmly.

"Then perhaps you could begin by explaining why."

"That depends, Mr. Redburn."

"It does? On what?"

"On you. On who you are and what you are. The quality of your imagination. Do you, for instance, believe in the end of the world?"

This wasn't at all what Redburn had expected. "As a religious matter, do you mean? Like the day of judgment?"

Lijinsky smiled, a private gesture, ambiguous in meaning. His overwhelming mood of weariness remained, but when he spoke, his words did not lack force. "As a scientific matter, too."

"I'm afraid I don't fully understand."

"Nor do I. Which frightens me. Not just me but my surviving colleagues as well. We are merely small, frightened men, Mr. Redburn, and please do not forget that. It is the reason why we are here now in your country and not dead in far-off Russia. The end of the world is coming and, through a freak of fate, we possess the power to decide when and how it shall come to pass."

"Then you have made a terrible discovery?"

"No." Lijinsky shook his head. The matter seemed important to him. "The discoveries were made before, often by men other than ourselves. The atom, as you are no doubt aware, has been split. When this process occurs—nuclear fission—when the nucleus of a heavy element is split through neutron bombardment, the result is the release of enormous quantities of energy. None of this is new knowledge. Since early in 1943, my colleagues and I have labored to put this fact to practical use. The Russians asked us—and we agreed—to produce an atomic bomb."

"But you did not succeed?"

"We succeeded. On August 29, 1944, such a device was exploded. Its destructive force, we estimate, equalled that of some seventy-five thousand tons of TNT."

Such a figure was too huge to carry any real meaning. "Wouldn't that be enough to flatten an entire city?"

"One of average size, yes. Our bomb—the first one—was not large.

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There are few limits to the destructive power of such weapons."

Redburn felt the need to proceed slowly. He wanted to be sure he understood everything. "And you successfully set off one of these bombs before the Germans completed their conquest of Russia."

"We did."

"Then why wasn't the bomb used against the Germans?"

"One was. We completed two. The other was the original experimental device."

"You dropped a bomb on Germany big enough to destroy a city and they managed to keep the whole matter secret?" Redburn couldn't conceal his disbelief. Could Lijinsky possibly be lying? Was this whole story only an elaborate hoax but, if so, why? What was the point of it all?

"I'm afraid you misunderstand me. The weapon did not explode. An attempt was made to drop the device over Berlin. The date—perhaps history will want to record it, too—was October 4, 1944. The bomb did not work because several of my colleagues—including myself—deliberately sabotaged our own work."

Redburn had grown only more confused. "So the Germans won the war."

"They did."

"And you could have prevented it?"

"Perhaps." Lijinsky shrugged slowly. "Who can say? The time was late, very late. As I told you, only two atomic bombs had been completed. It would have taken several months to have a third operational. Chances are the German armies would long since have completed their conquest. In Berlin, thousands would have died pointlessly.

The matter was not a simple one. There were other considerations, too."

"What?" Redburn sensed Lijinsky's reluctance to pursue this subject, but he refused to be kind. "What other considerations?"

"That is difficult to say. I can only ask for your opinion. You decide, as we did. Which is worse: a world ruled by Hitler and his armies or one ruled by Stalin and the atomic bomb? We chose the former alternative—temporarily. Were we wrong? You tell me."

Reburn couldn't answer. Such questions were alien to him. Europe had long been ruled by bad men but, at least since 1846, this had not affected America. He sensed that the world had somehow grown smaller almost overnight. "But you still managed to escape the Germans and come here."

"We did that. The Zionists, of course, helped. When defeat appeared inevitable, Stalin gave the order for our mass execution. Most of us died. Twenty-nine escaped and came here. Twenty-eight now survive."

Redburn leaned back in his chair. He felt he had all the facts now, and he believed what Lijinski had told him. "If we turned you over to the Germans—

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did what they want us to do—would you go?"

Lijinsky shook his head, smiling wanly. "I assume you are suggesting suicide?"

Redburn nodded. "I thought it might have entered your mind, yes."

"I cannot speak for the others," Lijinsky said, "but for myself the answer must be no. I will continue to run from the Germans, whom I hate, as long as such a policy is feasible, but if necessary I will stop, throw up my arms, and become theirs. As I told you, it is my opinion that the end of the world is an inevitable event. Everywhere, men rush eagerly toward the chasm. I see Russians, Germans, Zionists, Japanese—none are different. Can I alone—one petty man—stop such a stampede? No. The Germans are a scientific race. Much of the theoretical foundation upon which our work is based was conceived and developed in its original form by Germans. Their scientists are now fully aware of our success and our method. In two years, three at the very most, they will have their own bomb. We twenty-eight could only hasten the process."

"And the Germans don't realize this?"

"Oh, I assume that they do, yes."

"Then none of this really makes sense. The Germans are willing to go to war to speed up the inevitable? Why? Who do they fear? Russia is beaten, Australia destroyed. The Japanese have turned pacifist."

Once more, Lijinsky smiled. "You have forgotten someone."

"Who?" said Redburn.

"You," Lijinsky said. "The Germans fear you."

John Redburn stepped outside into the cool air of late evening. The twin bonfires continued to burn at both sides of the cabin, but their harsh light had weakened to an amber glow, and the bodies clustered around them now seemed like motionless shadows. As he moved across the soft, moist earth in front of the cabin, one figure suddenly pulled away from the fire and approached him.

It was Hannah Weintraub.

Redburn felt her prying, curious eyes. "He told you," she said.

"He did."

"Everything?"

"I imagine so, yes."

"And?"

Redburn kept walking, forcing Hannah to match his pace. "He said I ought to prepare for the day of judgment."

"You don't want to talk about it?"

He had to think about that. "No, I do."

"Then come with me."

Hannah took his arm and led him around the cabin. The bulk of the building cut off any light remaining from the bonfires. A garden grew back

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here—a small, neat rectangle. Hannah squated upon the ground and drew Redburn down at her side.

"So what are you going to do?" she said.

He realized that he did not know, had not decided. "What can I do?"

"You must decide." Her hand upon his wrist pressed eagerly. "It's your choice to make."

"No." he drew angrily away from her. "It's not me. It's got to be the council. I'm only one man—an ordinary man."

"Bullshit. They'll do whatever it is you tell them to do."

He tried to laugh. "This isn't Europe, Hannah. I'm not an American Hitler. We decide things freely here. The council is made up of old men, and I'm young."

"That's why they'll listen to you."

"No. You don't know us. Don't try to understand."

"Then just trust me." She put her hand on his shoulder this time. "Look, John, wasn't I right the other time? Didn't I say once you were through speaking with Lijinsky you wouldn't be angry with me any more? And you're not, are you? You know I did the right thing bringing you here."

"It may have been right, but I wish you hadn't."

"We all wish that, John."

He nodded. They were close. It was strange, not comfortable, almost debasing. He believed he could have this woman now. The night was dark. No one was stirring. He struggled to keep in mind that she was not good looking. Beauty in a woman had always been important to him. Hannah represented everything he had always despised in the Europeans. She had tricked him—used him callously. "Hannah, what is it you want me—us—to do?"

"Refuse the Germans. Tell them straight out that you won't co-operate. Kick Werner and the rest out of America."

"Then we'll have war."

"Then win the war."

He recalled what Yoshimura had told him about modern warfare. "That can't be done."

"It can. With the bomb—Lijinsky's bomb. You can win the war here and then destroy the Nazis in Europe. One bomb can annihilate Berlin. They'll have to surrender. Their own people won't tolerate that."

He was appalled. She was asking his people—the savages of America—to mount a modern war of destruction. She was asking them to be just like her. "We can never do that."

"If you don't, who will?" She was calm, certain of her own righteousness.

"I don't understand."

She took his hands grimly in hers. She drew close, intimate. "The Russians are beaten. The Japanese are afraid. If you people fail too, then this world belongs to the Nazis. Their dream of a thousand-year empire will cease to be a fantasy. You've been

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given this great weapon. You cannot refuse to use it."

"We can."

"Is that your final answer? Is that what you really believe?"

"No. It wasn't an answer. It was a statement. We can refuse."

"But will you?"

"I just don't know," he answered truthfully.

She kissed him. The suddenness of the act caught him entirely by surprise. He didn't resist. It seemed somehow appropriate—no more insane than anything else that had happened recently. He went close to her and held her in his arms. They fell back into the wet earth of the garden. He felt her strength as she pressed hard against him from below. This was ridiculous. Was she trying to bribe him with her body? He ought to refuse. He ought to run away like a maiden under assault.

He touched her throat. Her lips pressed against his. He made no attempt to flee.

"You're going back now?" Benjamin asked Hannah, when she and Redburn reappeared in front of the cabin. He made no mention of their absence.

She nodded. "I don't dare stay away any longer. Even this way, gone all night, he won't like it."

"You'll have a story prepared?"

She laughed. "I always have several."

"Good." Benjamin punched her arm, then walked away, back to the smoldering fire.

"Let's go," Hannah said to Redburn.

He joined her in the car. They both occupied the front seat now, a meager testimony to past intimacy. He felt neither guilt nor shame at what they had done together. He did not feel soiled or used or wronged. He was certain Hannah felt the same. In fact, that was the oddest thing about it: how neither of them seemed to feel very much of anything.

"You're going to take me home," he said. The car clung close to what appeared to be a vague roadway. Hannah drove much too fast. The car bounced and thumped across the rocks and ruts. It was impossible to see what lay ahead in the darkness beyond the sweep of the headlights.

"No, I can't."

"You mean you're not through with me yet?" He had meant to make a joke, but his words came out oddly bitter.

Hannah took no notice. "I'm through but the Germans may not be. They'll be waiting at your house, watching for any sign of your return."

"So? They can't hurt me. They were watching before, too."

"No, it'll be different now. They may try to kill you."

"In Capital City? I don't think they'd dare."

"No, they would." She spoke casually—death was not extraordinary in

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her world. "You said so yourself. They saw you leave with a woman and they'll assume it's me—Hannah Weintraub. You were right about everything you said on the way out here. We planned it that way—I did."

"Then I'm a fugitive."

"I'm afraid so, John."

Her certainty convinced him. Hannah knew the Nazis and he did not. "Then I suppose I'll just have to go somewhere else. I have a friend—Maucha Brightman. I'll stay with him until the chiefs arrive for the council."

"Do you trust Brightman?"

"Why, yes. Yes, of course. Is there any reason why I shouldn't?"

"He's afraid of the Nazis."

"Well, so am I."

"Not in the same way."

"Maybe not," Redburn said, "but I really have no other place to go. I'll stay with Maucha and then speak to the chiefs. I know you think I can wave a magic wand and make them do what I want, but these are old and wise men and I wouldn't dare try that. I'll speak to my uncle in particular. His name is Sundance. The other chiefs respect him and I want to know what he thinks we should do."

She seemed ready to laugh. "You're going to tell him about the atomic bomb?"

Her tone irritated him. Maybe it was the long day and his own exhaustion but he was angry. "Look," he said, "We're not savages. Sundance happens to read four languages. He knows Kant and Hegel and Marx and all the rest. I learned more from him as a boy than I ever did from my teachers at Cambridge. Sundance never went to a university. He never visited Eruope. He rides a horse and kills and cooks his own meat. But he's not ignorant. He's not stupid. And, compared to some of your people, like Hitler and Stalin and Napoleon, he's not a savage either."

"I never said he was—a savage, I mean. I just said—"

"I don't care what you said. It was your tone I didn't like. I'm sick of it. Sick of all your petty contempt. I spent seven years in Europe and I won't tolerate more of the same in my own country. The joke's worn thin. We don't fight wars. We don't massacre innocent populations. We don't create fascism, communism, or imperialism. No Indian has killed a man for any but a personal aim since 1846. I don't know of any Europeans who can say things like that. If there's any real savages on this earth, then I think it's you, not us. I think you could learn a great deal from Sundance, not the other way around."

Her tone was amused. "Are you saying that if Hitler had been born in one of your wigwams, he might have turned out to be a very nice man after all?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I am saying."

His refusal to back down seemed to disturb her. Hannah fell silent. Dawn caught them at the outskirts of the city.

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She stopped the car beside a wooded field. "This might be a good place. Do you know where you are?"

He looked around, finding his bearings. "Yes, I think so."

"Then I'm going to have to let you out. Find your friend's house and go there. I don't think it's far from here."

He had recalled that Maucha Brightman's house lay just on the other side of this field. How had Hannah known that? "No, it's close-by."

"Then go there. But be careful. The Germans may be watching there, too. Don't try to go inside till you're sure it's safe."

"I'll be careful." He started to get out of the car, "Look, I'll want to get in touch with you. After I've talked to Sundance, after we've made our decision. Is it possible? Where will you be staying?"

"I think it would be better if I contacted you."

"No. I may not stay with Maucha. I may go somewhere else. I'm not very good at this game. The Germans may spot me. And if they do and you come there, then they'll have you, too."

He could see her considering what he had said. When she spoke, there was no hesitation. Later, he had to wonder why. Was she still angry with him for what he had said about savagery, or was there some other, deeper force that made her want to speak? "Then it's easy to get hold of me. I live with Colonel Werner, you see. I live in his house. The name I use is Anne Shapely. Look for me there. Have Maucha look for me."

He noticed that she wasn't looking at him as she spoke. "Colonel Werner? You—you work for him?"

"No," she said softly. She pushed him gently toward the door. "No, I'm his mistress."

He got out of the car. As he hopped off the running board, he didn't know whether he ought to laugh at her joke, cry at her sorrow, or rage at her treachery.

When the car pulled away from him, he still didn't know what to do.

Maucha Brightman occupied a big white wooden house, with a wide front porch and a huge rolling lawn, that had originally been constructed by one of the ruling European families, the Washingtons, during the later eighteenth century. The last of the Washington family had presumably either perished in the massacre of 1846 or else fled homeward to England soon after, and Brightman's grandfather, an Iroquois warrior, had taken over the big estate. Maucha now lived alone, even though there was room enough inside the house for several large families to co-exist comfortably side-by-side. John Redburn hid in a tiny room on the third floor. Brightman brought him food twice each day, and he slept on a few straw mats and some cured hides.

As the days went by, Maucha Brightman grew increasingly nervous.

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Redburn had told him about his meeting with Lijinsky and about Hannah Weintraub. Brightman didn't laugh when Redburn revealed that Hannah was presently living in Colonel Werner's own home as his mistress. Brightman was still meeting with Werner on a regular basis, and Redburn soon gathered that the Nazi threats were becoming louder and more detailed. Most of the chiefs had long since arrived in Capital City—many brought from the faraway West by German planes—but it was not possible to convene a legitimate tribal council until every last member could be present. As usual, the casual nature of American government only confused and irritated the Europeans. Colonel Werner was not a patient man to begin with. It was Maucha Brightman's task to inform and soothe the Nazis. The strain was beginning to show all over him. His voice stammered, his fingers twitched, his feet constantly fidgeted.

Redburn was aware that his own presence in the house wasn't exactly adding to poor Brightman's peace of mind. He trusted Maucha but knew he was frightened and didn't especially blame him. The Germans were watching from without. That first day, after his ride with Hannah, Redburn had snuck past three of them to gain entrance into the house. Brightman believed tht the Germans guessed where Redburn was hiding. They guessed but did not know for sure, and Redburn held out the hope that they wouldn't dare move until they did.

So Brightman agreed to bring Chief Sundance to the big house to meet with Redburn. Redburn awaited his uncle in the solitary darkness of his hiding place. Brightman had vetoed the idea of holding the meeting downstairs, where the Germans might sneak close to a window, peek inside, and see, but he had reluctantly agreed to permit the burning of a small lantern. Redburn thought he'd wait until Brightman actually returned with the old chief. After the days he had spent hiding here, Redburn knew that this tiny room had to stink. There were mats and hides on the floor but no furniture. He had not been able to bathe since before his arrival here.

But Chief Sundance, when he entered the room with Brightman, who carried a lantern, did not seem to notice these signs of disrespect. Instead, he stopped just beyond the doorway, bowed his head, and murmured, "The son of my beloved brother."

Sundance's conduct puzzled Redburn. It was he, not the old chief, who should properly have shown respect. Tentatively, Redburn stepped forward and gripped his uncle's hands. "Great uncle," he said, "and great friend."

"I am deeply honored," said Sundance.

"No, it is I who is honored."

"You must sit." Sundance pointed to the floor.

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Uncomprehending, Redburn sat as directed. He had visited his uncle only once since his return from Europe, but Sundance had not acted this way then. He was an old man, well past eighty, but he still carried himself with the power and dignity of someone half his age. Sundance stood over six feet tall, and his hair was pitch black in color, matching the tone of his eyes.

The two men faced each other on the floor. Brightman placed the lantern between them, then drew back into the shadows. Redburn started to speak, then hesitated. Who should speak first?

Chief Sundance said, "Lately, I have seen many wondrous things. One of those metal flying devices—airplanes—came to my home, swooped me up, and brought me here. An old man of the Apache nation who came with us complained constantly. He said the airplane made a great painful clatter as it flew through the air. He said the eagle was soundless. I said, to the creatures who ride in the eagle's belly, the eagle is a noisy beast, too. The man was a stick-in-the-mud. He opposes all signs of progress. Soon, I moved and sat alone, where I could peer through the glass windows and see the clouds spreading out below. I looked very intently and, where we flew, I saw no eagles."

Redburn smiled. He knew his uncle's delight in all mechanical things. At home Sundance kept two automobiles, a washing machine, and a large console radio. The radio rarely received anything more decipherable than bursts of static, but Sundance kept it in almost constant operation. The electrical generator that allowed the radio to work was the only one within two hundred miles. "Maybe the Germans will agree to sell you a plane. That way you could do your own flying."

Sundance shrugged philosophically. "I made such an offer to our pilot but he refused. Do you imagine they may fear, once war comes between us, that I will lead our air forces?"

Sundance's tone disturbed Redburn. Had the chiefs already accepted the inevitability of war?

"But my good friend Mr. Yoshimura has promised me one of his," Sundance went on. "He says I am too old to be a great warrior and I believe he is correct."

"You spoke to Yoshimura?"

"We met early today."

"He was supposed to be in isolation."

Brightman stepped into the light. "He's apparently recovered now. The Germans are still angry about him. Just after dawn, he swooped down on the council hall, spoke for a quarter-hour with Chief Sundance about airplanes and philosophy and then disappeared. Colonel Werner, when he found out, was furious. He called it tampering. But what could I do? We're not at war with the Japanese and, besides, this is still supposed to be a free country."

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"It is a free country," Redburn said. But he was thinking about Yoshimura. That man stood as one of the great unknown factors in this matter. What did he want, and how did he intend to achieve his mysterious aim?

Sundance was shaking his head. "This Colonel Werner appears to be a serious man. My friend Yoshimura agrees. In time of war, Colonel Werner will make a poor soldier."

Redburn felt that the time had now come to speak of important matters. He glanced at Brightman, who remained at the edge of the circle of light. "Maucha, perhaps you ought to go downstairs and show yourself. We don't want the Germans to start wondering where you are."

"They'll see the lantern up here."

"Well, they'll just have to worry about that."

Brightman hesitated. It was clear he preferred to stay, but Redburn's words carried an authority he would not attempt to disobey. Redburn trusted Brightman. He had told him nearly everything—even Hannah Weintraub's real identity. But Brightman knew nothing of the bomb. To Redburn, that was more than a private secret. It was a matter of a special trust.

When they were alone, Redburn took his uncle's hand and spoke in a near-whisper. "We must speak together of this war. You have referred to it lightly, but I do not believe that you are unaware of the horrors of such a conflict."

"If war comes to America," Sundance said, "it will mean the end of all that is good in our lives."

"But you are willing to fight?"

"It would be a great crime to do as this Colonel Werner demands. I am an old man and the scars of 1846 are perhaps closer to my heart than yours. We gained much from that terrible deed: a nation, our freedom, a sanctuary for the world to share. We also lost much. Too much. The guilt is not something we can bear easily again. The guilt but even more than that the terrible shame."

"The Germans claim these men are criminals. What was terrible about what happened in 1846 was that the innocent died with the guilty."

"It is not to us to judge which is which, who is guilty and who is not."

"No, of course not." Redburn had intended to argue with his uncle, to draw out his real beliefs, but his heart lacked the strength to lie that forcefully. "Then is that what you and the other chiefs intend to do? You'll refuse the German demands and go to war?"

Sundance shook his head. "No decision has been made. We await further advice."

"Advice?" Redburn didn't understand. "Whose?"

Sundance gripped his nephew's wrist. "Why, yours, of course."

"Mine? But I'm not even a member of the council."

"That is the source of your strength. You see, Redburn, we are not

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one nation and never can be. We are many separate peoples, with many separate beliefs. I speak for the Comanche but no further. Of us all, only one man has yet bound us together and that was your father. He is dead now, and the responsibility must rest with you. If you fail us, if you leave us to our own devices, we will bicker, argue, dispute, and debate. War may come to us, but not from our own choice. It will come because we will not have decided what we choose, and such a war can never be won."

"But you said you wanted my advice. I can give that. But there's a difference between advice and direction. I can suggest what you ought to do, but I can hardly tell you what you have to do."

"In this instance, there is no difference. The chiefs await your words."

"But I—" He saw the hopelessness of refusal. This responsibility was neither something he had sought nor something he could accept. "Sundance, I know some things that you don't. I know why the Germans want these men."

"Of course you do." The old man's tone was firm, unsurprised. "That is why we look toward you."

"No, that is why I look toward you. Because what I know—what I have learned—it's something greater than I can fully understand. These twenty-eight men—I have spoken to one of them—claim to have invented a weapon capable of destroying entire cities. The Germans seek this weapon, and for that reason they will stop at nothing to capture these men."

"It is an atomic bomb," Sundance said.

"You know?"

Sundance smiled at Redburn's obvious shock. "No. But the theoretical possibilities have long been a subject of scientific conjecture. The atom possesses immense powers, not suprisingly; it is the source of all material things. It can create a city; it can destroy one.

"And they—the scientists—are willing to turn their invention over to us. They want it used against the Nazis."

"But that will mean war in either event. Is there no middle ground?"

"That is what I've come to ask you."

Sundance nodded, then fell silent. Redburn waited patiently for the old chief to decide, to tell him. At last, looking up, Sundance softly said, "No."

"No what? We shouldn't accept the bomb?"

"No, I cannot tell you. I am too old, too confused. There is a black space and a white space but the gray space obliterates both."

"I see."

Sundance stood. Reaching down, he picked up the lantern and held it in his hand. The harsh glow turned his face into a mask of wrinkled flesh. "We will wait. In three days, four days, all

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the chiefs will have gathered. You will come and address us then."

"I will—I will come." Redburn felt a great emptiness swelling within him. With the lantern gone, with the room now vacant, this feeling grew till it threatened to obliterate any opportunity for rational thought.

Decide? Him? Decide what? The possibilities seemed too immense. He could turn the scientists over to the Nazis and end it there—at least for a few months. He could refuse and go to war and prepare to see the destruction of his own land. Or, finally, he could accept the bomb and fight with that, but that would mean unleashing forces upon the world that were not rightly his to control.

The problem was, no matter how he decided, something would be lost.

Even if he did nothing—folded his arms and slept for a dozen years—the world would not long remain the same.

He didn't want to decide. Everything within him rebelled at the prospect.

And yet, if he didn't, who would?

John Redburn wasn't so foolish that he believed he could trust the man who lived in the house ahead, but Sadao Yoshimura possessed one quality that everyone else involved in this matter lacked: perspective.

Right now, more than anything else, Redburn sought a viewpoint that could stand back and peer, if only fleetingly, at the largest possible picture. He had to know, whatever he decided to do, what would happen as a result. Yoshimura, more than any other man, might guess those conceivable answers.

Redburn crawled on his belly across the soft dirt of the front yard. He had seen no one here yet but assumed the Germans were most likely watching the house. In order to escape Brightman's home, he had had to sneak past five of them. He didn't know what would happen if they actually caught him. Would they kill him? He didn't know, but he did recognize that his life was too important a commodity now to be risked casually.

A bright light burned upon the front porch. As Redburn grew closer, he made out the distinct figure of a man seated in a chair. It was Yoshimura. He was smoking a long pipe.

Redburn almost grinned. In the years he had known Yoshimura, he had never once seen him smoke. But that only made sense. Yoshimura, deliberately, was never the same two days in succession. His life was predicated upon the condition of constant change. This was what gave him his perspective and his freedom.

Redburn had come within a dozen yards of the porch when Yoshimura stood and beckoned with a hand. "John, you may stand up. The Germans are gone."

"Gone? Are you sure?" He felt silly lying on his belly, speaking aloud. If

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the Germans were there, they'd caught him now.

Yoshimura bowed politely. "A strong protest from my government to theirs. The Germans feel that I am no longer dangerous. We are still allies, you know."

Redburn followed Yoshimura into the living room. The light continued to burn on the porch behind him. "I'm surprised the Germans still care."

"Oh, they do." Yoshimura smiled. "Especially now. You see, the one thing that has long kept our nations bound together is fear. The Germans now fear you Americans. They seek our friendship. We stand aside and wait."

"For how long?"

Yoshimura's smile faded. "Surely you cannot expect me to predict that."

"No. No, I suppose not." Redburn sat beside the low table.

"Wine?" said Yoshimura.

"Yes—please."

Redburn glanced at the door behind him. This was the place where everything had begun. The German agents had entered there. A few yards beyond, four men had died.

"I have spoken to Chief Sundance," Yoshimura said, joining Redburn at the table. "He is one of the world's wisest men and you should be proud to bear his blood."

"I spoke to him last night myself."

"Ah," said Yoshimura, "then he must know, too."

"Know?" said Redburn.

"About the atomic bomb, yes."

"Then you know about that."

"The German codes are poorly equipped for secrecy. There is little my government—and thus I—do not know. Of course, I had guessed long before. Do you intend to accept the offer?"

The suddenness of the question caught Redburn by surprise. He answered truthfully. "I don't know yet."

"I'm sure Hannah explained the reasons why you should."

"Yes, she did." Redburn drank to conceal his confusion. Why should the mention of her name upset him? Was it because he could no longer think of Hannah without also thinking of Colonel Werner? This was a terrible world. What was Hannah? A viper hidden within a nest of kittens? Or was she only a vulnerable bird herself?

"Why did you come here, John?" Yoshimura asked, with uncommon bluntness.

He appreciated the chance to stop thinking of Hannah. "Because I need your help. Your thoughts. You have a perspective that I can't attain. What I'd like to know, I suppose, is the future. If, say, we do accept the bomb. What will happen then?"

"Do you mean will Japan enter a war on the side of Germany? I can hardly tell you that."

"No, not that. I don't mean the near future—five or ten or twenty years from now—I mean the future

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that's important—a hundred years and more. This bomb isn't just something to blow up cities. It's more than just another weapon. It will change the whole world, both for good and bad. I suppose I want to know how."

"It will bring us closer together," Yoshimura said.

"I've thought of that. I've thought of the way it can make us all the same. Even if we do accept the bomb and use it, what's to stop your country from building one of its own? Lijinsky said it wasn't that difficult. And then what will happen? With the Nazis defeated, a dozen countries will rise and each will want its own bomb. Then the wars will come. Wars fought with weapons we can't even dream about. I don't want to be the person who allows this to happen."

"But can you stop it?" Yoshimura said.

"That's what I'd hoped you could tell me."

"Then I will." Yoshimura stood and crossed the room, showing a curious impatience. "I come from a country which has, several times in its history, attempted to seal off the future. As you know, for more than three hundred years, we successfully withdrew from contact with the rest of the world. We were alone, isolated, and we thrived. Your nation, I believe, has attempted to do something similar this last century. Similar but not the same, and I think that's the key. The past is always extinct. Each moment is always different. I cannot tell you what will happen tomorrow because I exist now and tomorrow is not, as we sometimes think, merely the child of today. It is a new creature—a great young beast. Tomorrow may bring Utopia or it may bring the apocalypse. But the decision is not yours or mine to make. There is no choice. It will happen. That is all we can say. It will happen, and we can only wait and watch and, if we do not first die, see."

"Then you're telling me that it doesn't matter what I decide?"

"Oh, no, I'm not telling you that. It matters very much. It matters to me, to Sundance, to Colonel Werner, to Hannah Weintraub. But I am not sure it matters to what we call the world. It does not matter to time."

There was a knock at the door. Redburn could see him reaching toward the gun he kept concealed in the folds of his kimono.

But, when he opened the door, the man who came inside wasn't a German.

It was Benjamin, the Zionist agent. "They—they've caught Hannah," he said. "Werner has. What—what can we do?"

Redburn came up off the floor in shock and surprise. "Who—who told them who she was?"

Benjamin stopped. "What is he doing here?"

Yoshimura, unperturbed, was shaking his head at both of them. "Please, gentlemen, calm down. We

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must trust each other. We may not belong to the same sides, but we do, I believe, seek the same objectives."

But Redburn was not in a mood to be calm. He came over, grabbed Benjamin by the arm, and shook him. "What's this about Hannah? What have you done? How could you let them have her?"

"Please, John." Yoshimura drew him gently aside. "If you must lay blame in this matter," he whispered, "then please vindicate poor Benjamin. He has done no more than follow orders issued by a higher authority. If you must blame someone, then blame me."

Redburn was confused. "You? What do you have to do with any of this? Surely you're not responsible for placing Hannah's life in jeopardy."

"Ah, but I am," Yoshimura said, brushing the front of his kimono. "I'm afraid I must make a confession. John, I am chief Zionist agent for America. My authority extends over both continents."

Redburn could only gape. "But you—you're not—" He stopped. What he had intended to say sounded like the weak punchline to a bad joke: but you're not Jewish.

"Ah, but I am that, too." Yoshimura began to explain, speaking of a distant ancestor, a British sailor shipwrecked on an alien coast. "Of course, during the years of the Tokugawa shogunate, it was Japanese policy to kill all intruding foreigners, but my grandfather was a brilliant and wily man. He managed to delay his own execution until he had become the intimate advisor of the powerful warlord who captured him. It is a stirring tale, well-known throughout my family. A reverence for my grandfather's religion has also remained with us."

Redburn was shaking his head, barely hearing Yoshimura's words. Would anything in this matter long remain the same? Was nothing permanent anymore?

With dawn drawing threateningly close upon the horizon, John Redburn crouched close to the ground and peered at the broad imposing bulk of the German consulate. "I think we ought to be sure we know what we're doing before we move," he told the man beside him. "You're certain the Germans don't know that you know."

Benjamin shook his head. "They don't. I was a minor employee. I doubt that my absence has even been noticed. We Zionists are cautious people. My cover could never be broken."

"And Hannah's?" Redburn said.

"That's why I'm convinced that someone told Werner. It's the only possible explanation. You knew. Are you sure you told no one else?"

"I'm sure. But what about you? If someone told them about Hannah, why didn't he also tell them about you?"

"Because I'm here, and Hannah isn't. That's how we know I'm secure."

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Benjamin's logic seemed fine, but Redburn still worried. A piece was missing somewhere—a crucial element without which the picture made no sense at all. He felt like a blind man in a dark room. He used his hands to guide the way.

According to Benjamin, Hannah had been arrested early in the afternoon. He hadn't found out himself till much later in the day, and then only by accident—the chance remark of a gloating SS captain. Benjamin had then gone to tell Sadao Yoshimura the news. He had not been able to find out any further details without arousing suspicion. As a minor employee, he was expected to act like one.

Redburn had advocated an immediate attack upon the consulate, but both Yoshimura and Benjamin had opposed such a move. During the course of the night, a force of twenty armed men had been gathered. They now stood around the consulate in a tight circle. When Benjamin gave the signal, they would attack. Yoshimura, of course, had remained cautiously at home.

The German consulate was a big stone building three stories high with a sunken basement. The Germans had built it themselves at the turn of the century when their diplomats had first arrived in America. Redburn had never been inside; few, if any, Americans ever had. Benjamin insisted that internal security wasn't as tight as might be anticipated. Redburn could see a pair of armed soldiers near the front door and knew there was an additional pair stationed at the back. Benjamin said he was also sure that Hannah was being held somewhere in the basement. Surprise was their best weapon. They had to move swiftly—and at once.

Redburn said, "Let's go."

Benjamin seemed suddenly hesitant. "Are you sure?"

"Yes."

Benjamin raised his pistol. The noise would also alert the German guards, but it was the only way they could devise of insuring that everyone moved at once.

Benjamin fired a single shot.

Redburn sprang to his feet and ran forward.

As soon as he moved, it seemed as though ancient instincts rose up to take control of his body. He had served as a soldier before, of course, but never in this fashion. War, as seen from the air, remained a cold, impersonal event. Here it was direct, brutal, messy. But he knew what to do. He never once hesitated. His hand came up of its own accord and he felt his finger squeezing. The pistol fired. One of the guards at the door fell. Distantly, Redburn realized that he had just killed a man. The thought meant nothing to him. It was just words.

He kept running.

It seemed like only seconds had passed when he and Benjamin were kicking open the door.

Redburn vaulted through the open-

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ing first. "Hannah Weintraub!" he screamed. "We've come for Hannah Weintraub!"

Two soldiers came racing down the corridor toward him. Redburn raised his pistol, but before he could fire off a shot, there was a crackling noise and the two men fell. He glanced past his shoulder. At least a dozen darkly-dressed men crowded through the door behind him. The first stage of the attack had passed; they were winning.

He grabbed Benjamin. "The basement. You said she was there. Hurry. We've got to get there before they kill her."

Benjamin said, "Yes—hurry." The hesitancy he had shown outside had faded. He moved crisply down the corridor, bent over, his gun ready. Redburn followed and so did several others. The rest spread out through the consulate to take control of the building. Benjamin and Yoshimura had together designed the plan of attack. Redburn didn't care. His one intention was to find Hannah and get her out of here. The others could help him as they wished. If necessary, he was willing to act alone. Werner and his men had had Hannah in their hands all day. They knew that she knew where the refugee scientists were hidden and would stop at nothing to force her to talk. Hannah would never talk.

Earlier, while Yoshimura and Benjamin had discussed the surest method for cutting off the consulate's communications, he had attempted to calculate the odds on her still being alive.

He had given up after a few seconds. Hannah just wouldn't ever talk.

Benjamin had found a door along the corridor. "This leads down."

"Then go," said Redburn.

"All right." Benjamin clutched the knob and gave it a turn. Soundlessly, the door swiveled open. "It looks safe." Benjamin took a step forward.

A crackling cascade of bullets sent him tumbling down. Redburn, who saw the blood pumping from the wounds in Benjamin's chest, dropped beside the body. He fired blindly into the light beyond the door. He could see nothing. Hannah was down there, but he was trapped.

"Better try this." It was one of the other men. Redburn looked at the grenade in his hand. Unhesitantly, he pulled the pin with his teeth. He let the grenade glide through the open door.

The floor shook under the impact of the explosion.

Redburn counted softly to three, then stood and dashed into the smoke. He held his pistol at readiness but could see nothing. A sharp stone stairway led downward. He moved his toes tentatively, feeling a safe path.

At the bottom of the stairs, the smoke cleared. He stumbled across a dead man and saw other bodies. One, half-buried under a mass of rubble, twitched slightly. Redburn ran to him. His torn uniform barely identified the boyish blond as a member of the German army.

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Redburn slapped the boy's blood-smeared lips. "Hannah Weintraub. She's down here. Where?"

The boy couldn't speak. His free hand twitched meagerly. Redburn thought he might be trying to point. "This way," Redburn cried. A half-dozen men still followed him. "They've got her held down here."

It was another narrow stone corridor. He met only one soldier, but shot him instantly. A number of offices opened off the corridor. Several were filled with cowering frightened men and women. A sense of urgency gripped Redburn. He ignored everything till he reached the end of the corridor. The door here was big and wide and reinforced with hard steel.

Something told him Hannah Weintraub was behind this door. He no longer doubted his instincts for a moment.

Redburn fired a shot at the lock. When it didn't budge, he said, "Grenade."

The explosion seemed to take forever in coming. Redburn and the men with him took shelter in the nearest office. There were people around them screaming, whimpering, weeping. Redburn told them not to worry. They had come here only to find a friend and meant to harm no one.

The explosion knocked the heavy door off its hinges.

Redburn was the first man inside the room.

The first think he saw when he passed the doorway was Colonel Werner. His eyes wide with either fear or surprise, he stood in the center of the dim, windowless room. "Redburn!" he cried.

Hannah Weintraub sat in a stiff-backed steel chair slightly to the left of Colonel Werner.

Redburn shot Colonel Werner and kept firing at the dead man until his empty gun went *click*.

Then he went to Hannah.

He tried to hold her in his arms, but he was afraid of hurting her. Her body was like that of a broken doll.

A hesitant voice said, "She's alive, John."

Redburn recognized that voice. It belonged to someone he had known for a long time.

He turned his head and saw, approaching from an inconspicuous corner, a familiar figure dressed in dark buckskin.

Maucha Brightman.

"She isn't dead," Brightman said. "Werner would have gone on and on but I made him stop. It was dreadful—horrible— what he kept doing. She wouldn't talk—she didn't say one word. I saved her life. It was me who did that, John."

"She's dead," he said, studying the broken figure in the chair, but just as he spoke, he noticed something. Her chest moved. Just barely—a twitch of life—but it moved.

Raising his pistol, Redburn turned and pointed the barrel at Brightman's

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heart. "You told Werner. It had to be you, Maucha. You told Werner who she was."

Brightman stopped cold. He seemed unable to comprehend what was happening. "John, no." He lifted his hands and placed them in front of his chest. "You can't kill me."

"Why not, Maucha? We're both savages, aren't we? Isn't that what savages do?"

Brightman kept looking at the other men in the room—the Zionists—as if expecting them to help. "It was a mistake, John. An honest mistake. I thought it out carefully. I talked to Colonel Werner. He promised me. He said, if we gave them what they wanted, the Germans would never bother us again. I had to believe him. I knew the council would never agree. Do you know what war would do to this country?"

"I know, Maucha. I know better than you. And you believed him. You believed what Werner told you. You assumed, because he was a man like you, that he wouldn't lie." There was contempt in his tone—but a sadness, too. A weary, beaten, battered sadness. Of course Maucha had believed him. They all had. Savages did things like that. Savages thought that all men were human.

Redburn looked at poor Hannah and saw how wrong they all had been.

He threw the gun away.

When Maucha, grateful tears welling up in his eyes, ran across the room, Redburn knocked him aside. "The gun was empty all the time," he said.

Then Redburn picked up Hannah Weintraub and carried her twisted, torn body into the corridor and then on and up, way up into the clean, cool air of the American dawn.

John Redburn had explained his feelings to these four dozen men and now all he could do, in a last burst of savage innocence, was admit the truth. "I know what I'm asking is a terrible thing. It will mean suffering for us and for our children. It will mean a new America, a different kind of country that can never be the same again. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I'm mistaken. But I do know this: these Germans are exactly as I've described them."

And then, knowing there was no need for questions or answers, he turned on his heel and left the council hall.

These forty-eight men, the chosen chiefs of the great tribes of America, would have to decide. They were old men. Only a handful had seen fewer than sixty winters pass. But they were wise. They were red men. They were innocents. He knew he would finally have to let them decide.

Outside the big, round wooden hall, Sadao Yoshimura and Hannah Weintraub waited for him. Hannah's face showed the scars of her hours with Colonel Werner, but she had been walking again for several days now and was able to move with only a slight limp.

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Yoshimura asked, "Did they decide?"

Redburn shook his head. "No, not yet. They'll want to talk it over. This is a momentous thing I'm asking them to do. They know the consequences. It won't be easy."

"But which do you think it will be?" Hannah said. "Your uncle at least—he seemed willing to go ahead."

"My uncle is willing to do many things, but he does very few. I don't know. There are so many different things involved. There's Maucha—they all know about him and feel shamed by it. There's the practical risk. The Germans may be able to build a bomb of their own before ours is made operational. And there's the guilt. If they say yes, they know it'll mean thousands of innocent lives."

"But millions have died already," Hannah said.

He shook his head, unwilling to argue. Hannah Weintraub's world and his rarely mixed; this was not one of those occasions. "I'm not talking about people dying. I'm talking about innocence. We came close to losing it once—at the time of the White Massacre. This time, I don't think we'll ever get it back."

"And is that so bad, John?" she asked.

When Chief Sundance emerged and told them that the decision was yes, that the gift of the bomb was accepted, Redburn was no closer to answering Hannah's last question than before.

Which did it mean?

Had the red men of America shed themselves of the curse of savagery?

Or, instead, had they finally put it on?

(from page 43)

are involved with a particular girl, partly because Mark is such a rockhead—and the old struggle between technology and magic undergoes another climactic cycle.

As noted, this is not a perfectly told story, because of its discontinuities. But it's very good reading when there's something there to read, and filling in your own blanks can be rewarding rather than annoying. There are some very attractive minor characters, one of whom is a dragon, and in general this is a very pleasant book.

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Letters

Why we waste so many copies of the magazine

Dear Mr. Ferman:

The story, Bunny-Eyes by Karen G. Jollie in the May, 1980 issue is one of the loveliest, most poignant, and best-written stories you have published in many a moon. Thank you for selecting it, and please thank Ms. Jollie for writing it, I hope she can maintain the high quality of quiet insight, poetry, irony, and appreciation for elements of our human condition as she writes more.

May I ask you a question about your publishing policies. For years, I've read the Publishers Statement that is required by law, and it shows such a large print run for the Magazine, with only about half of the print run actually distributed in some way (figures in the 600,000 for printing and sometimes less than 300,000 actually sold by subscription or newsstands or given away). Perhaps you need the higher print run for advertisers, but couldn't you save a lot of money by not printing so many copies and increasing the value of individual copies by not losing so much to the printers? Paper is costing more and more, I'm sure, not to mention labor costs. I don't understand the economics of publishing a magazine where half the print run is thrown away. Could you take a minute to explain? I want the magazine to flourish, because I've certainly enjoyed it for over twenty years.

—Ursula T. Gibson
Tujunga, CA

First, we do distribute almost every copy that we print, in that all printed copies are either mailed to subscribers or shipped to retail outlets. It is true, however, that more than half the copies sent to newsstands are ultimately not sold and are returned or destroyed. This is a common situation for most magazines and paperback books. Newsstand sales are a difficult and inefficient proposition for all but a handful of "supermarket" and men's magazines. Many quality magazines do not sell well on newsstands (e.g. The New Yorker *sells about 40,000 copies;* Saturday Review *only 8,000,* The Atlantic *about 30,000). The distribution system does not effectively get 10 copies to the store that can sell 9 or 5 copies to the store that will sell 4. You can help by letting us know if your local outlet does not carry F&SF or if it sells out each month. We will ask our distributor to follow up in each case and make an effort to improve coverage.*

—E.L.F.

Disch's "Toaster"

Just a note of thanks for giving us Thomas Disch's "The Brave Little Toaster." This Beaglesque gem should be snapped up by several anthologies; if not, there ain't no justice in the world. Kudos also to Gahan Wilson for the fine cover. I only hope Disch doesn't succumb to the temptation of writing gossipy books about the sordid lives of major appliances.

—C. Gregory Futch
Tampa, Fla.

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Gut shot

I am not generally in the habit of writing to magazine editors; however, two of your recent issues have brought me to my typewriter in a state of awe—for which I want to thank you and the authors responsible.

First, my thanks to Marta Randall for her fine story, "Dangerous Games," in the April issue, as well as adding my thanks to her for her excellent novel, *Journey;* I'm waiting impatiently for *Hart's Children.*

And second, I'd like to thank F&SF for bringing me one of the most truly horrifying little tales I've read in years. I'm referring, of course, to Lisa Tuttle's "Bug House" (June). I should explain that I am very demanding in my requirements of a horror story—not only must it scare the daylights out of me while I'm reading it (an obvious must), but it must also have the ability to return that horror days, weeks, even years later. One which fits the bill is R.E. Howard's "Pigeons from Hell," which still evokes a rash of gooseb umps...those slow, deliberate footsteps as Branner, or what is left of him, comes downstairs while Griswell sits there, waiting, watching...

Another tale with the same effect is a story my Irish grandmother told me when I was a child about a haunted house in Armagh and a disembodied hand with a penchant for strangling folk in the middle of the night—fairly standard Irish fare, but it to this day, nearly 25 years later (and while I write this!) brings my neck hairs straight up!

And Lisa Tuttle has done it again. Part of my reaction comes from the fact that the wasp and her spider prey has haunted me since childhood; I never have been able to think of that pair without wondering ... what goes through that poor creature's spider-mind, day after day, lying there? Can it anticipate? Does it know what will eventually and irrevocably happen? And I always think — *what if it does?* What must it be like, that waiting, that knowing, that awful anticipation, that utter, complete helplessness — and I always shudder with a delicious horror at the mere possibility. Lisa has captured the essence of that horror and with it, the even greater, more real, horrors of rape. Rape, of course, is not a crime of sex, but of violence and abuse; the use and invasion of one's self and body brings about much of the rape victim's trauma and Lisa has brought this concept of *use* to an apex. She has captured all the brutality and terror of rape and combined it with the horrors of that 'spider' who now *does* have the faculty to anticipate. As Peter so calmly and malevolently says, "...but this is just a spider. And what does a spider know?"

Bug House scared the absolute hell out of me when I read it, ruined two perfectly good night's worth of sleep with buggy nightmares and still creeps up to gut-shoot me during the day when I least expect it — hunkered down on the lawn digging crab grass, waiting in an endless line at the supermarket, driving. I *know* — with a connoisseur's delighted anticipation — that it will be with me for years to come, that I shall never hear or read of a rape that it won't come back to me, that I'll never think of wasp and her prey without your story there, nib-

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bling at the edges of my mind. There may yet be an entire generation of women who are terrified of wasps, as there is a generation now who can't—thanks to Anthony Perkins — take a shower without first locking the bathroom door!

—Susan Horton
Pickering, Ont., Canada

Screaming with laughter

I do not often write fan letters, but I can't resist this time. Please forward this to Eric Norden, along with my hearty delight over "The Curse of Mhondoro Nkabele" (Sept. 1980). It's a good thing I was home alone in my secluded mountain cabin when I read it, because I screamed with laughter. As a struggling young writer myself, I know about rejections, and have at times been driven to ponder seriously whether it is I who am insane or the editor. In fact, I just recently wrote an Edgar Allan Poe-tic story about a poet who cannot believe the editors are rejecting his work. The beginning is eerily similar to Norden's story, but from there it takes an entirely different direction. (The poet's style is also outdated.)

So you can see, I was hooked on "The Curse" from the first lines for several reasons. I particularly liked all the SF name-dropping and in-jokes, which can too easily be overdone. I think Norden captured Ellison's acidic but honest charm best of all. My only remaining wish is that I could hear comments on the story from the parties mentioned, i.e., Asimov, Ellison, Leiber, Sturgeon, Malzberg.

Thank you, Mr. Ferman, for publishing "The Curse of Mhondoro Nkabele." I trust no coercion was necessary. And thank you, Mr. Norden, for writing it.

—Shari Prange
Boulder Creek, CA

Up Late

"Feesters in the Lake" by Bob Leman (October) was one of the few stories that I have ever stayed up late for the privilege of finishing reading.

I wish *F&SF* would publish more stories in the weird genre, especially if they are as good as this one. At any rate, let's have more by Leman, please.

—M. Russell
Los Angeles

"Dismember me for Harold's choir..."

Dr. Isaac Asimov has written some excellent science fiction, which I enjoyed reading; I look forward to reading more.

Icky Asimov writes synthetic humor such as "Death of a Foy;" I should be happier if that were published in his own magazine, to which I can then not subscribe.

—Peter Ingerman
Willingboro, N.J.

Two comments on the October issue:

1. The problem with Zenna Henderson's "People" stories is that they always leave me hungry for more.

2. I think "Death of A Foy" has earned the Good Doctor the Star-Mangled Spanner Award for 1980. When I got to the last paragraph, I screamed a four-letter word, threw the magazine at the wall, and muttered, "I wish *I'd* said that!"

—Elaine Hampton
Burbank, CA

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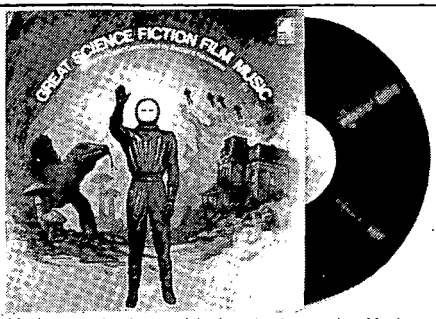

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